

# MANAGING YOUR PAIN CALMING SKILLS 2

## DEALING WITH MENTAL CHATTER

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*Do you find that your mind wanders when you practise calming exercises and relaxation? Perhaps you fall asleep? Dr James Hawkins discusses the challenge of keeping your attention focused and the art of staying in the present*

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### THE BALANCE BETWEEN ATTENTION AND LETTING GO

When you start practising calming exercises you will soon notice how often your attention is side-tracked by thoughts and other distractions. If you simply let go your tensions and allow your mind to wander as much as it may want to, you are likely to end up in a daydream or fast asleep. However if you try very hard to keep your attention concentrated on the calming exercise, it is easy to end up frustrated by your lack of success and even more tense than when you started. The challenge is to achieve a balance between keeping your attention on the exercise and at the same time letting go tightness and tension.

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### THE FISH ANALOGY

There are many ways of tackling this challenge. One image I often use is of a fish who is doing a calming exercise that involves focusing its attention on a gently waving bunch of weed. It finds this very relaxing! Floating past however are many fishing hooks with tempting worms on them. The worms represent memories, plans, fantasies, physical distractions, outside noises and other competitors for our attention. It is easy to get hooked and distracted away from the exercise that we are doing.

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### THREE LESSONS

There are three main lessons that I want to take from this image. The first is that hooks are normal. Distracting thoughts will float through our minds. This is usual. One major lesson is to accept that the distractions are there without being hooked by them. Let the irrelevant thoughts float by without giving them our attention.

The second lesson is that we will occasionally be hooked. This too is normal. When we are hooked, the challenge is to notice that this is what has happened. We don't have to struggle or make some great effort. Fighting the distraction is likely to get us more involved with it. We will tense up and drive the hook in more deeply. Noticing – simply and honestly noticing – this is what's important. When we notice, when we attend to what is actually happening, then our mind automatically slides off the hook. We don't blame ourselves. What happened is already in the past. We are not interested in history when doing calming exercises. We are interested in the present, in the state of our mind, our nerves and muscles right now.

This leads to the third main lesson from this image. Attending to what is happening in the present is an art. We lead most of our lives in a sort of daydream, half asleep. We are remembering, planning, worrying, wanting, fearing. We are distracted in so many ways. Our lives are short, yet we waste them by being elsewhere – lost in our self centred concerns. It is fascinating to notice how much of what we learn when doing calming skills exercises also applies to our everyday lives. The calming skill is just another slice of life. It is simplified so it is easier to notice the games our minds get up to. What we learn however often applies to our lives in general.

**Dr Hawkins specialises in the treatment of stress-related symptoms, working through the charity “Good Medicines”. You can try practising calming skills using his CD Coping with Persistent Pain. The CD costs £13.00 from the British Holistic Medical Association (see below).**

**British Holistic Medical Association**, 59 Lansdowne Place, Hove, East Sussex, Tel 01273 725951. CDs and tapes for pain, stress, relaxation, sleep, meditation. Available from BHMA, PO Box 371, Bridgwater, Somerset TA6 9BG, orderline 01278 722000, [www.bhma.org](http://www.bhma.org)

**Breathworks**, CDs for managing pain, illness and stress with guided mindfulness meditation, *Body Scan, Mindfulness of Breathing, Kindly Awareness*. Adapts a Buddhist approach to the management of pain and stress. Breathworks, 16-20 Turner Street, Manchester M4 1DZ; Tel 0161 834 1110, [www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk](http://www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk)

**Pain Relief Foundation**, CDs/tapes based on the pain management programme used at Walton Hospital, *Coping with Pain, Coping with Headaches and Migraine, Coping with Back Pain, Feeling Good* (assertiveness & self esteem), available as Pain Management Packs or individually. Also *The Relaxation Kit*. Details from Talking Life, PO Box 1, Wirral, Merseyside L47 7DD, Tel 0151 632 1206 (enquiries), 0151 632 0662 (credit card sales), [www.talkinglife.co.uk](http://www.talkinglife.co.uk)



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