

Attention and Distraction Techniques

Techniques to help direct your attention away from the negative aspects of IBD

Research suggests that many people find the following variations on distraction (or attention retraining) to be useful in managing pain and discomfort. You might like to experiment with some of them and decide if they will be useful to add to your own routine. The best way to use these techniques is to practice as part of your relaxation exercise (i.e. do your relaxation first and then pick one of the following to use straight after).

PAIN FREE ROOM. Close your eyes. Imagine in your mind a secret room. See yourself moving towards the door in your mind, reaching out and opening the door to the secret room. Know that inside the door is a room where pain cannot enter. It is a place where you feel warm, comfortable, refreshed, supple and content. In this room you are pain free. Allow your imagination to furnish the room in luxury. Imagine the shape, colour, texture and smell of everything in the room. Picture yourself relaxing peacefully in the room as you soak up the wonderful sensations of comfort, good health and peace. Allow the real world to fade into the background and bring your secret room to the front of your mind. Stay there for as long as you feel comfortable maintaining the image, then slowly allow yourself to leave the room, close the door behind you and return to the real world.

SPREADING PAIN FREE SENSATIONS. Pay attention to your body and notice any part of it that is not currently painful. Concentrate on that part of your body that is pain free. Notice what is happening to that part of your body; its temperature, movements, appearance, joints, nerves, skin, blood pulsing and so on. When you feel familiar with these non-painful sensations, imagine them spreading, slowly but surely out and away from where they started. Imagine the warmth, the smoothing of tense muscles, the regular pulse of the blood moving through your veins as it moves through your body, easing away the pain.

This one takes some practice! Start small, see if you can spread the pain-free area by a few centimetres at first and slowly build up, as you become more comfortable with the technique.

RELOCATING THOUGHTS. This technique is extremely similar to the one above however, rather than trying to spread the pain-free sensations around your body it requires you to shift your thinking from the pain site to try to “think” from a pain-free spot. This approach is really useful for people who struggle with long periods of pain and have difficulty managing fatigue. Just as you did with the example above, pick a spot of your body that doesn’t hurt – it might be your ear lobe, your elbow, your foot, your tongue etc. Once you find that part of your body, spend some time really focussing on what that body part feels like (blood pulsing, muscles, joints moving, texture, the feel of the air on the skin etc). Notice everything you can about that part of your body and then try to keep these sensations in mind as you carry on through the day.

OBJECT CONTROL. This time, pick a small area of your body where you are feeling a moderate amount of pain. What does the pain feel like? Can you imagine that pain being caused by a particular substance or an external object such as a vice or a knife? Picture the object there in the site of the pain. Focussing your concentration and attention on the painful site, imagine that you have control over the vice and begin slowly unwinding the handle. Feel the pressure easing little by little as you unwind the vice and eventually take it away. Likewise with the knife, imagine the knife is made of ice and as it gradually melts

away the pain decreases or you might like to imagine the knife changing from a sharp butcher's knife to gradually become a blunt butter knife.

TEMPERATURE CONTROL. If your pain includes an element of heat, sweating, shaking or cold, try to imagine yourself in a place opposite to the pain sensation. For example, if the pain causes heat or sweating, picture yourself standing somewhere in the shade of a big tree with a cool breeze on your skin. If the pain makes you feel cold, imagine yourself lazing on the warm sands of a calm tropical island.

REDEFINITION. This technique requires you to think of the pain in another way, in a more positive or helpful way. Some of the ideas that have been generated in past groups include: a "friendly warning", "it's normal", "muscles working", "oxygen pumping through the muscles" and "its part of the process of improvement". Some other ideas might include the pulling of muscles, stretching of scar tissue or muscle tension. How many other ways can you think of to redefine your pain?

LIMITING THE SCOPE OF THE PAIN. As we discussed, after struggling with pain for many years, some clients tend to generalise the pain to surrounding body areas. It can become easy to think of the whole body, or a large part of it, as being painful. It can also become easy to forget about those parts of the body that are not painful. This technique requires you to think carefully about which parts of your body really are painful and which parts are not. That is, it asks you to stop generalising and redefine the scope of the pain – redefine both the pain areas and the pain-free areas.

These techniques are meant to offer you a few ideas. You may be able to modify them to suit you better – or even invent new ones. They cost nothing to try and can be a very powerful mediator for pain. However, using imaginative skills is easier for some than for others. If this is something that you have not used often, be patient with yourself and allow yourself time to experiment with them. Once you master them, the rewards of success usually outweigh the frustrations of learning new techniques.

