Can Meditation Help Reduce Fibromyalgia Pain?

by STARLA RICH

Using Meditation for Fibromyalgia Pain Relief

As someone who has suffered from fibromyalgia for almost seventeen years now, I am all too familiar with what it means to live with chronic pain.

Most pain medications target inflammation, muscle, and joint pain, but since fibromyalgia stems from sensitivity in the neurological system, pain medications are ineffective against nerve pain. Even medications prescribed specifically for fibromyalgia, wane in their effectiveness over time as your body becomes immune to them.

Pain becomes a part of everyday life, robbing you of sleep and energy. Finding holistic alternatives can make the difference in a day or a lifetime. One such alternative is meditation.

A technique such as meditation gives you a measure of control rather than your pain and health condition controlling you. Meditation and mindfulness techniques are becoming more widely used as effective natural treatment strategies.

Pain and the Brain: How Meditation Can Help

You might think that when you stub your toe, the pain that you feel comes from your toe. Makes sense, right? Actually, pain is all in your head – the perception of pain comes from the brain, not from the place that you feel the pain. When your mom used to rub your “boo boo,” apply a kiss and say, “it’s all in your head,” she was right!

For people who experience chronic pain, this is good news, because we can alter the way the brain evaluates painful stimuli. The brain has the ability to choose which stimuli to pay attention to and which to ignore. Meditation is a very powerful tool that can help us encourage the brain to turn down the perception of pain.

Studies show that when people meditate, brain activity in regions related to pain perception can be altered, and this can correspond to higher pain tolerance.

For example, after only four days of mindfulness meditation training, people who meditated while exposed to painful stimuli showed a 40 percent reduction in pain rating and a 57 percent reduction in pain-unpleasantness compared to when they weren’t meditating. Focusing on something other than the pain or even the cause of the pain produces a significant reduction of that pain.

What Is Mindfulness Meditation?

While many forms of meditation can be helpful for controlling pain, the most effective seems to be mindfulness meditation. This type of meditation focuses on awareness of the present moment, with the intention of paying attention to moment-to-moment experiences without judgment.

Years ago, before all the sensory apps that are now available on our smartphones, I purchased one of those nature machines. My two favorite sounds were the sound of the ocean and the sound of gentle rain. I was able to close my eyes, breathe deeply, imagine those surroundings and turn my focus away from my pain and fatigue. The results were amazing! The pain was diminished and sleep much more attainable.

There are also formal settings that provide guided meditation. Many chronic pain conditions respond particularly well to a structured, eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program.

In this type of program, skilled practitioners train participants in a group setting to bring awareness to sensations, movements, breaths, and thoughts that come and go in each moment. The goal is to simply notice, not to react, to these experiences.

Mindfulness Meditation Benefits: It Helps Reduce Pain in a Variety of Chronic Pain Conditions

Meditation and mindfulness techniques can lead to improvements in pain intensity when compared to standard care for many chronic pain patients. It also may help improve pain-related disability, pain acceptance, feelings of control over the pain, depression, anxiety, and quality of life, immediately after treatment. Some specific conditions that respond particularly well include:

1. **Low-back pain.** An eight-week MBSR program significantly improved back pain in older patients, with sustained improvements even after a three-month follow-up. The majority of patients decided to continue to practice mindfulness techniques after the study because they believe it benefited them substantially.
2. **Migraines.** Pain levels for migraine patients can be improved with mindfulness meditation, as can quality of life, anxiety, and stress. A small study found that these techniques can improve the frequency and duration of headaches as well.
3. **Fibromyalgia.** Mindfulness-based therapy can be an effective fibromyalgia natural treatment. Women participating in an MBSR program experienced significantly reduced symptom severity, as well as reduced stress and sleep disturbances. Those who practiced the most at home in between sessions showed even further symptom reduction.

Give It A Try!

Along with helping reduce pain, meditation and mindfulness can help boost the immune system, treat depression, and more. In its simplest form, a meditation practice can be five minutes a day of sitting quietly and breathing deeply.

However, if you are really struggling with chronic pain symptoms, finding a way to incorporate a more involved practice into your daily routine could benefit you tremendously. Try finding meditation classes near you and try out different types to see what suits you. Or, search for an MBSR program, where you will learn the tools necessary to practice mindfulness techniques on your own to keep your fibromyalgia pain under control.