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Honoring Pain: A Loving Solution to Chronic Suffering

by Shirley Jean Schmidt, MA, LPC

We live in a culture that teaches us that pain is bad and therefore synonymous with suffering. To reduce this suffering we take pills, distract ourselves, use mental tricks to block our awareness of pain, and/or try to relax our pain away. We usually condemn our pain but rarely honor it with loving kindness. The fact is, pain experienced skillfully, with heightened awareness, can significantly reduce our sense of suffering. In many cases it is simply our negative *relationship* with our pain that makes it a problem. There are a variety of easy-to-learn mindfulness meditation techniques that can help us greatly improve our *relationship* with pain. Most chronic pain patients who use these techniques report significantly lower levels of both pain and suffering. Others report that even when pain levels remain high their level of suffering can be low. Here are a few ways you can take a loving approach to pain:

Thinking of Pain as a Small Injured Child

Picture the pain as a small, injured child that you are to care for. Would you curse the child? Would you shut the child in closet or beg the child to go away? Would you wear earplugs so you wouldn't have to hear the crying? Would you tell the child she is bad for having pain? Unfortunately this is usually the way we respond to our own bodies. Treat your body with the same respect and care you would show an injured child, with soothing attention, compassion, gentleness, and loving conversation.

Honoring the Pain with Loving Kindness

Breathe into the pain, noticing size, shape, color, texture, and movement of energy within the pain. Imagine loving energy flowing in and around the affected body part. Picture small openings into the painful area, openings which will allow loving energy access to the center of discomfort. Set aside negative thoughts about the discomfort and focus on thoughts of compassion for the affected body area. At some level your body believes the pain signal will enhance the chances of survival. Thank the pain sensation for it's honorable intention of promoting your survival.

Letting Go of Resistance and Moving with Pain

Focus your attention on the pain sensation. Is there a movement within the sensation? It could be fast or slow; it could be swirling, flowing or vibrating. It could be rhythmic and smooth, or irregular and disjointed. It might even seem perfectly still. Just notice whatever is there. Begin to look for something soothing in the nature of the movement. For example, often the movement in pain is like flowing or pulsing water. In such a case you might imagine being on a raft on a beautiful lake, allowing the pulsing in the pain to match the movement of the water. If this is a comforting experience, allow the whole body and soul to drift and flow with the soothing water. In contrast, when there is no movement, and the pain seems perfectly still, allow that inner stillness to calm and center you. By entering and embracing the discomfort (whether through movement or stillness) you are letting go of your resistance to the pain. By letting go of your resistance you are letting go of suffering.

Pain as Music and Dance

Focus your attention on the pain sensation. Imagine that your aching body part is actually a huge dance floor. Can you connect the subtle details of the sensation with a favorite piece of music? It could be classical, jazz, rock, or blue grass... it really doesn't matter. Allow your good feelings about the music to dance with the discomfort. Now, go even deeper by allowing the energy throughout your body to dance with the beautiful rhythm generated by the sensation of pain.

Our fear of pain is usually so great we find it hard to imagine that some components of discomfort can actually be refreshing. These simple, loving techniques can be rejuvenating and healing. They can be used any time, anywhere, for both physical and emotional distress. Mastery of these techniques can enhance the quality of all aspects of life.

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