

## Participating in Positive Activities and Cultivating Positive Emotional States

Substantial attention has been given to the impact of negative emotional states on persistent pain conditions. The adverse effects of anger, fear, anxiety and depression on pain are well-documented. Complementing this emphasis on negative emotions, interventions aimed at cultivating positive emotional states to reduce pain and improve well-being in patients are now being examined.

Hanssen and colleagues suggest interventions promoting positive emotions could contribute to improved pain, mood, promote adaptive function and buffer the adversities of a chronic pain condition through various mechanisms.(1) These include the modulation of spinal and supraspinal nociceptive pathways, buffering the stress reaction and reducing stress-induced hyperalgesia, broadening attention, decreasing negative pain-related cognitions, diminishing rigid behavioral responses and promoting behavioral flexibility.

In a study by Muller and colleagues, participants performed at least one positive activity for at least 15 minutes at least 1 day/week for 8 weeks.(2) A control group was instructed to be attentive to their surroundings and write about events or activities for at least 15 minutes at least 1 day/week for 8 weeks. Those in the positive activity intervention demonstrated significant improvements in life satisfaction, depression, pain intensity, pain interference, and pain control at program completion and 2-month follow-up. Based on these results, I developed the handout below and encourage all patients with persistent pain to engage in activities they enjoy on a daily basis, even if for brief periods of time.

1. Hanssen MM, Peters ML, Boselie JJ, Meulders A. Can positive affect attenuate (persistent) pain? *Curr Rheumatol Rep.* 2017;19(12):80.
2. Muller R, Gertz KJ, Molton IR, et al. Effects of a tailored positive psychology intervention on well-being and pain in individuals with chronic pain and physical disability: a feasibility trial. *Clin J Pain.* 2016;32(1):32-44.

### POSITIVE ACTIVITY EXERCISE

Research has shown that when people with persistent pain perform at least one positive activity for at least 15 minutes at least 1 day/week for 8 weeks, they have significant improvements in life satisfaction, depression, pain intensity, pain interference and pain control. Here is the list of positive activities and ideas for you to consider. You may have other ideas of positive activities that interest you. Choose at least 1 activity each week to do for 15 minutes. Do more if you find this exercise is helpful and you want to increase your positive activities. It is important to choose the activities that interest you or you can truly enjoy.

**Kindness:** Choose to be kind to others. Perform good deeds for other people, whether friends or strangers, either directly or anonymously, either spontaneously or planned. Notice how you feel when you are kind to someone.

**Gratitude:** Count blessings, appreciate the goodness in your life or offer gratitude to others. Reflect on and/or write about what you are grateful for. You could write a thank you note to

someone, keep a gratitude journal or invite someone to be a gratitude partner and share your gratitude experiences.

**Savoring:** Take delight in life's momentary pleasures and wonders. Be open to beauty and savor pleasant aspects of ordinary experiences. For example, if you see a pretty sunset, pay close attention to the colors and the feeling of wonder they evoke in you. If you have a positive interaction with another person, notice your mood, thoughts, body sensations. If you have a pet, savor how you feel when you pat or cuddle your pet.

**Flow:** Increase the number of challenging and absorbing ("flow") experiences. These are activities where you are in the present moment, feel fully immersed and involved in the what you are doing and enjoy the process of the activity.

**Take care of your body:** Engage in physical activity or exercise. Take a walk. Practice some simple stretches. Turn on your favorite music and move to the rhythm in a way that feels good.

**Spirituality:** Seek meaning and purpose, find the sacred in ordinary life, listen to your heart and spend time in prayer or spiritual contemplation. If it would be a fit for you, become involved in a religious or spiritual community consistent with your beliefs.

**Relationships:** Strengthen and enjoy your relationships. Pay attention to positive interactions during your day. Reach out to people and spend time together or talk by phone. Express appreciation and affection for others. Be supportive of others and share what matters to you with people close to you.

**Goals:** Pick 1 or 2 achievable goals that are meaningful to you and small, realistic steps you can take to achieve them. Devote time and effort to pursuing these steps and goals.

**Optimism:** Reflect on and write about your positive qualities, strengths and best possible future self. Identify and engage in an activity that draws on your positive qualities and strengths and/or supports your best possible future self. Choose to talk to yourself like you would support and coach a friend as you participate in this activity.

**Forgiveness:** Reflect on forgiving others. Write about forgiving and letting go of anger and resentment toward other people. Remember, when you forgive, you do not condone a hurtful behavior, rather you free yourself from the burden of past hurts.

This Clinical Pearl was provided by PSIG President, Carolyn McManus, MPT, MA. Clinical Pearls reflect succinct, clinically relevant information drawn from your experience that can benefit patient care but may not be found in the medical literature. We'd love to hear your suggestions. Please send your ideas for a Clinical Pearl to Bill Rubine, MPT at [Rubineb@ohsu.edu](mailto:Rubineb@ohsu.edu) or Carolyn at [carolyn@carolynmcmanus.com](mailto:carolyn@carolynmcmanus.com).