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Column: The mind-body-spirit connection

Article: Good News: More Options for Pain Management

Author: Gale Lyman, RN, CCM, HN-BC

Thirteen to fifteen million Americans suffer from chronic, intractable and severe pain. For many, conventional medical care does not completely manage their symptoms.

The good news is that the field of complementary and alternative medicine provides additional options to manage pain. Research has shown that mind/body modalities such as guided imagery, music and hypnotherapy can all help. People in pain have used energy modalities such as Reiki and acupuncture with success. You can use each of these modalities along with conventional healthcare. They are considered “integrated” or “complementary”.

Guided imagery is using your imagination to create positive mental images. An instructor, tapes or scripts written specifically for pain relief can help you with this process. Benefits of guided imagery have been proven in helping relieve cancer pain, post-operative pain and cranial-facial pain.

Therapeutic music is another technique. Instrumental music is best, but it is important to choose what you like. If you're hospitalized, use a CD player with a headset or an MP3 player. Music improves mood, encourages relaxation, and elevates the pain threshold. The benefits of therapeutic music used to alleviate pain have been proven in cancer, high risk neonates, burn care, post-operative care, hospice, osteoarthritis and open heart surgery.

Hypnotherapy involves achieving a psychological state of awareness that is different from the ordinary state of consciousness. When you are relaxed, your unconscious mind is more accessible, and you are more susceptible to suggestion. Scientific evidence supports the use of hypnosis for chronic pain, cancer pain, low back injuries, surgery, dental procedures, burns, tension headaches and repetitive strain injuries.

Another method is Reiki. Reiki is a Japanese technique used for stress reduction and relaxation. Using a series of gentle hand positions, on or off the body, life force energy passes through the practitioner to the receiver, restoring personal energy field, balancing energy and clearing energy. Preliminary studies have shown that Reiki, in combination with standard pain medication, improved pain

control. More studies are needed to confirm the pain management benefits of Reiki.

Finally, acupuncture, over 5000 years old in China, is one of the foundational practices of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Tiny needles are used at specific points along the meridians, to balance the flow of ki. Several thousand years of research according to Chinese medicine standards supports the use of acupuncture for pain. In the US, according to conventional medicine research standards, benefits are proven for pain related to dental procedures, fibromyalgia, osteoarthritis and back strain during pregnancy.

If you are experiencing chronic pain, and are considering complementary and alternative modalities, get informed. Visit the “Be an informed consumer” section of the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine website, www.nccam.nih.gov. Download these documents: “Selecting a CAM Provider”, “Talking to Your Physician about CAM”, and “Herbal Supplement Safety”.

You will find that there are some things you can do for yourself, and others for which you need a trained professional. For example, you can learn to do Reiki, choose soothing music, or purchase a pre-recorded guided imagery. Or you could receive a Reiki session and get expert guidance on choosing music and guided imageries.

To find a local acupuncturist, visit <http://acupuncturists.healthprofs.com/cam/state/MA/> and type in your location. If you’re looking for a national board certified hypnotherapist, visit the National Board for Certified Clinical Hypotherapists at <http://www.natboard.com/index.htm>. Holistic nurses often offer these integrated modalities. Visit the American Holistic Nurses Association's “Practitioner Directory” at www.ahn.org to find a local holistic nurse. Another way to find a professional practitioner is to ask friends and colleagues for referrals.

To learn more, seen an integrated health professional to discuss what is right for you. And always, coordinate all aspects of your health care with your primary physician.