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In Pain??

Whatever You Do, Don't Go To The Beach

by Shirley Jean Schmidt, MA, LPC

Guided imagery is a popular technique for managing pain. It goes something like this... "Imagine yourself on a beautiful beach far, far away on a lovely, sunny day. The air temperature is just right and there is a perfect breeze. As you see yourself laying on the beach you feel your body becoming more and more relaxed. You become so relaxed you feel no pain at all, in fact it may even feel as if you have no body at all."

This sounds very nice, doesn't it... calming, relaxing, and far away from troubling pain. I propose that this type of guided imagery for pain management is a mistake. That's right, a mistake! In my opinion any benefits of this are short-lived and levy a high price in the long run. Consider the following story as an analogy:

A young mother has been home all day with her infant child. He has been crying non-stop for hours and she is exhausted. Tired of listening to the screams she realizes she can just take a walk. She puts on her Nike's and walks out the front door. The farther she gets from the house the quieter it gets, and before long she feels much better. Eventually she realizes she'll have to return home. She prays the noise will have stopped when she returns, but alas, as she approaches the house she hears her baby crying. She wishes she did not have to return home, but knows she must. She knows that for better or worse (probably more the worse) she'll be connected to her fussy son for years to come.

How do you suppose her baby feels? Abandoned, betrayed, angry, unprotected? Of course! And we all agree this is type of abandonment is outrageous. Now consider that a baby and a body have a lot in common. A baby depends on caretakers everything - food, shelter, warmth, love, safety. Likewise, your body depends on you to provide the same things. A body without a person in good control will not last long. And a body, like a baby, needs a loving, supportive caretaker.

So, you might argue, relaxing on the beach sounds supportive. Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Let's take a closer look... "As you see yourself laying on the beach you feel your body becoming more and more relaxed. You become so relaxed you feel no pain at all, in fact it may even feel as if you have no body at all." Hmm... I wonder how the body feels about that. I propose the body is thinking the following, "Oh damn, she just disconnected from me. I've been trying all day to get her to listen and she hung up on me again. I'll have to keep calling until she finally pays me attention!" Over time what follows is quite predictable. The person keeps disconnecting from the body and the body screams louder with pain, creating a vicious cycle.

Of course, escaping to the beach is not the only way to disconnect from the body. Other methods include drugs, alcohol, distraction, and mental tricks to block awareness of the body. It's no wonder so many of us are fond of these methods. Our culture is constantly selling us ideas and products which reinforce the disconnect paradigm. We are taught to dominate the enemy, fight what we do not like! We're told, "If you have pain, fight it, dominate it, suppress it, don't let it win!"

Okay, I'll concede there is a time and place to fight the enemy and dominate the foe. Cockroaches in the kitchen, for example, is a good time to apply this principle. But, in my opinion, body pain should not be covered by this paradigm. Rather managing pain should be compared to nurturing a frightened child, or comforting a sick baby, with compassion and gentleness, and most of all staying connected to the body!

We are taught that pain and suffering go together like hand in glove. I propose they are not a matched set. Pain is a physical sensation of discomfort, while suffering is a negative relationship with that discomfort. What happens when one learns to have a positive and supportive relationship with pain? I'll tell you... suffering goes down, pain goes down, and healing is enhanced.

Here's how it works. Think about a part of your body that is in pain now, or if you're not in pain, think of a part of your body you're dissatisfied with for any reason. Focus your attention there... and imagine directing your in-breath right into this area of your body. Imagine a loving, compassionate, non-judgmental breath nourishing this area. Say to it "Hi body, how are you? You're very precious to me. Do you need anything from me today? Please let me know how I can help you... and thanks for your years of service." How does your body feel now? You may find it is noticeably more relaxed.

So, you ask, how is this relaxation different from the relaxation of going to the beach? Many who escape to imaginary beaches hold an underlying assumption that pain, like the crying baby, is an unwelcome nuisance. The beach is their escape from the pain they cannot tolerate.

But I say, it is tolerable! Not 'grit your teeth' tolerable, but 'open your heart' tolerable. Focus loving kindness like a laser beam on your body's discomfort. I promise you, you will naturally feel better and you'll strengthen a bond with your body that will last a lifetime... good for anything that ails you.

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