

NeuroMind Techniques

The Searchlight

Every moment of every day millions of messages are flooding into your brain from every part of your body. Unless you pay attention to them, most of them pass unnoticed. For example, it's unlikely you've paid any attention to your right earlobe while reading this. Or your left little toe.

If you turn your attention to your left toe right now however, you can start to get some information about it - whether it's hot, cold, comfortable etc. This information has always been supplied to you (if it wasn't, that area would feel numb) but until now you hadn't given it any attention.

You can view your attention as a searchlight inside your mind. Whatever is in the searchlight of your attention expands and fills your whole world. Where the searchlight of your attention is aimed will determine your reality. Pain messages automatically jump into this searchlight when they arrive in your brain.

We are hard-wired for this to happen. This is fine if the pain message is caused by an injury - for instance if you've put your hand in a fire. You need this pain message to immediately grab your attention so you can prevent more injury. However, if the pain message is coming from your sensitised pain system, it doesn't mean physical injury.

And every time your searchlight highlights this message and gives it centre stage, you're strengthening this pain amplification. Once you have the image in your mind of the searchlight of attention, it's time to use it in a different way. When a message comes up to your brain that's part of your usual chronic pain, instead of letting it fill your awareness, turn the searchlight of your attention to another area.

Place all your awareness in a mindful way onto the activity you're doing now. Pay minute and close attention to it. Let that fill your consciousness - not the pain. For example, really look at the interface where your activity is occurring. If you are writing - then focus on the point of your pen where the ink pours onto the page. If you are standing - feel the contact of your feet within your shoes or the contact between your shoes and the ground.

Notice how this changes second by second. If you are sitting - feel the pressure on your sitting bones, the contact with the seat. The feeling of warmth, cold..wind on your face... sunshine on your back ...light slanting through a window....see, hear, feel, smell - as if for the first time.

This brings you into the present moment - the moment of the possible. Taking the searchlight off your pain and onto your outside world not easy to do. We're designed to give pain messages priority to keep our body safe. However, every time you practice turning your attention away from your familiar pain and onto something else, you are

strengthening your descending inhibitory pathway - the pathway that turns down pain amplification.

As you practice and become better at this, you will notice the pain message coming up less often, and with less intensity. It takes dedication to do this, and a firm belief that the message demanding your attention is in fact fake - a spam message from your pain system.

When you're firmly resolved this is the case, you'll be able to give spam pain messages the attention they deserve - which is zero. It's for this reason we've spent so long up till now understanding the problem. Because it's likely in your search for a cure you've been given dozens of physical reasons for pain - from damaged discs to muscle imbalances.

Against the myriad of physical explanations for your pain, you need to hold up this explanation. And over time you'll strengthen it with your experience of turning down your pain with just the power of your mind.

Colour & Shape Visualisation

This technique is suited for people with visual minds. Here's how it works: Every time you feel the pain, you're going to alter the way you perceive it. To do this, give it a shape, colour, size and weight. By doing this you're altering the way the pain message is received in your brain, and preventing the emotions this usually triggers. Picture the pain as an object as vividly as you can.

For example: a pain in your neck and shoulder could feel like a bright red sausage about 6 inches long and 3 inches wide. It could pulse and twist as you move. Once you've created a strong picture of the pain as a physical entity, change it in some way. If it's red (painful) see a cool blue colour starting to permeate through it. If it's large and heavy, see it shrink in size and become lighter.

Once you've done this visualisation as concretely as you can, turn your attention back onto whatever it is you were doing. Fill your awareness with your current task. Then after a few minutes, turn your attention back to the painful area and picture the pain once more. See its colour, shape, size and weight. Just be curious.

At this stage, most people will note a change in the visualisation. The pain has become smaller, it doesn't feel as intense, and it's less powerful. Keep repeating this practice: altering how the pain looks and feels - turning your attention out into the world - and then checking back to see how your pain has changed.

Once they become familiar with this practice, many people skip the first part and go straight to the soothing imagery. They flood the painful area with cool blue light, or send a soothing colour down the nerve synapses in the spine. This technique works because

it interrupts the typical pathways the pain message uses - amplified pathways which have been reinforced over time.

By giving the pain message a different meaning and processing it a different way, you're building new neural pathways, and breaking the old connections between pain and emotion that keep chronic pain sustained. Like all the techniques, the more you practice this, the better you'll become at it.

However, while you're practicing, it's important to let go of expectations. Simply observe the results of your practice like a curious scientist. This will stem the emotions of frustration, impatience and despair which block people from doing the visualisation successfully.

Nerve Message Visualisation

Quite a few people I've taught have adapted what they've learnt about the pain system to create a visualisation practice. They picture the message coming from the place they feel pain, travelling along the nerve, and arriving at the junction with the spinal cord.

This is the point where the message is either amplified up to the level of pain - or turned down. Visualise the message entering the nerve junction - and coming to a cool soothing place.

See the message diminish in size and become just a normal message - conveying a sensation of ease and comfort. Mindfulness and Attention Transfer This is a practice to train your attention. The process is simple and it gets its power from being repeated multiple times throughout the day - whenever you feel pain. When you feel pain taking over your attention, pause.

Consciously shift your attention away from the pain - and onto whatever you are doing right now. Let that fill your world in as much vivid detail as possible. Look, see, touch and smell your exterior world as fervently as if it were your last moments on this earth.

This is not the same as denying the pain is there, or trying to resist it. Instead, you're changing the focus of your attention: to your present environment, and what you are doing now.

Over time, this will become an automatic response. As you become more skilled at shifting your attention every time your pain occurs, you train your pain system not to amplify pain messages.

Your pain system will keep sending amplified messages as long as they get your full attention. As you continue to effectively ignore amplified messages, your pain will gradually fade away.

The Second Arrow

This is a concept from Buddhism. It says that pain is universal - but suffering is optional. With your new understanding of the pain system you now know you feel physical pain in your body when a pain message arrives in your brain.

This purely physical process is what the Buddhists call the first arrow. However there is a second arrow. This second arrow is your reaction to the pain message. It is the story and emotion you add when you feel pain.

Often this is much more serious and harmful than the first arrow. It is the main reason for suffering, and can prolong chronic pain because strong negative emotions increase the amount and duration of the pain you feel.

Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. With chronic pain, reducing your suffering also reduces your pain and breaks the chronic pain cycle. The key is to recognise these two arrows. Learn to distinguish between them so you can eliminate the second arrow.

To do this you need to become The Observer inside your mind. As the pain arrives, you notice it and then (in this tiny moment in time) you note the story and emotion attached to the pain. When you are aware, you will see this very clearly. Remember - the story and emotion are your creation, so it is something you have power over. Once you see it, you can examine the second arrow.

You can pull it out, turn it over and you can shine light on it from any angle you like. Then you can judge whether your emotion and the story behind it is accurate and helpful. Most of the time it isn't, and the second arrow you've created is causing you unnecessary suffering.

Seeing it takes away its power over you, and you can now decide on a better story and emotion to go forward with. As with all mind-body techniques, in the beginning this may be difficult, but with practice and determination you'll learn how to do it wonderfully well. When I had chronic pain I would get a sudden very painful stabs of pain in my back. They would last perhaps a few seconds.

But the emotional fallout from this would go on much longer. By refusing to take part in the aftermath, I gained a feeling of control over my pain, and it didn't bother me as much. And, over time, this also reduced the intensity of the pain I felt. If you remember back to chronic pain becomes intertwined with the emotional centres in your brain. Taking away the emotional response to the pain reduces the driving power behind it.

Body Scanning and the Search for Comfort

We are hardwired to scan our body searching for any areas which don't "feel right". This occurs without thought and is part of the way that we stay safe. When you have a normally functioning pain system it's a useful habit. However when your pain system

starts to malfunction, scanning your body and focusing on the pain message will feed the pain.

Once you understand the pain you're feeling is coming from a malfunction then it makes sense to do something different. The problem is, it's very difficult (albeit impossible) to not scan your body.

It's like trying to not think of a pink hippopotamus (you just did, right?) However, you can replace 'scanning for pain' with 'scanning for comfort.' As you become aware you're starting a body scan, focus your attention on the parts of your body that feel comfortable. If you have pain on one side, it's very useful to focus on the 'good' side instead.

For example, if you have pain in your left hip, then focus your attention on the right hip. As you do, you can also speak to your sore hip and explain that this is how you want it to feel. You're using your mirror neurons to let the good side teach the bad side.