

Complementary Therapies and Relaxation Strategies

Complementary therapies and relaxation strategies are not substitutes for conventional medical care. They are often used alongside medical treatments.

Talk with your healthcare provider in case they have concerns about a certain therapy and your health circumstances. For example:

- Some herbal products or teas may affect your prescribed medications.
- Heat therapies are best avoided with certain health conditions.
- A therapy that works for one person might not work for another.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a technique believed to balance the flow of energy in the body. This therapy should only be performed by a trained acupuncturist using clean or disposable needles, and it is not recommended for people with serious blood clotting conditions.

May be particularly helpful for pain stress, and nausea.

Biofeedback

Biofeedback is a way for people to become more aware of how their bodies react to stress. Electrodes are placed on the skin to measure muscle tension, temperature, heartbeat, and sweating. With the help of a licensed biofeedback technician, people can learn how to influence these measurements. Heart rates, for example, can sometimes be lowered by releasing tension throughout the body.

May be particularly helpful for anxiety, pain, fatigue, and nausea.

Breathing exercises

Breathing exercises can be a helpful way to relax. First, find a comfortable, safe place to sit or lay down. Slowly take a breath in through your nose if able, otherwise breath in through your mouth and slowly release the breath out through your mouth as though you were blowing bubbles through a straw. You might try this for a minute or two and gradually increase this over time to your level of comfort. Numerous videos are available online to help guide breathing.

This may be particularly helpful for fatigue, nausea, sleep disturbance, pain, and anxiety.

Counselling and social support

Feeling worried, distressed, or sad lowers a person's quality of life and worsen symptoms like pain, anxiety, and nausea worse. These feelings are common and should be discussed with a healthcare provider or someone who can provide social support.

Anyone with a life limiting illness can benefit from counselling and social support.

Distraction

Distractions like watching a TV program, listening to music, or taking part in a conversation with family or friends may be helpful in reducing some symptoms.

May be particularly helpful for anxiety, pain, shortness of breath, fatigue, , constipation, and symptoms related to swollen belly and malignant wounds.

Herbal remedies

Ginger may decrease nausea. Peppermint tea may also be helpful. The effects of some herbal remedies are not always well studied, so check with a healthcare professional before taking any.

May be particularly effective for nausea.

Hypnosis

Hypnosis is a sleep-like state that leaves a person more open to suggestions such as feeling less anxious and reduced pain. A healthcare provider may be able to help find someone trained in hypnosis.

May be particularly helpful for anxiety and pain.

Imagery

Imagery is like a deliberate daydream which focuses the mind on calm, soothing images. Imagine a scene that is relaxing, such as a quiet beach with the waves lapping on the shore. Numerous free apps and videos are available to help guide imagery, or a healthcare provider may be able to recommend someone who is skilled in imagery.

May be particularly helpful for shortness of breath, pain, fatigue, nausea, sleep disturbance, anxiety, and symptoms related to swollen belly and malignant wounds.

Massage

Massage relaxes muscles and encourages blood flow in the area that is being touched, and it is often a very pleasant experience. Massage should be performed by a licensed massage therapist. Massage is not recommended when skin is swollen, red, or raw.

May be particularly helpful for anxiety, shortness of breath, constipation, and sleep disturbance.

Meditation

Using this technique which includes mindfulness or deliberate focus helps to train attention and awareness, and achieve a mentally clear and emotionally calm state of being. Numerous free apps and videos are available to help guide meditation.

May be particularly helpful for pain, shortness of breath, nausea, sleep disturbance and anxiety.

Progressive muscle relaxation

This is a technique where muscles are tightened and relaxed throughout the body. Start at the feet, squeezing and loosening the muscles there if possible, and then slowly work up the body. A variation is to breathe in deeply, squeeze a group of muscles, and hold both the breath and the squeeze for a couple of seconds; then let go of the breath and let the body go limp. Relaxing the body may help to relax the mind.

May be particularly helpful for anxiety, pain, shortness of breath, nausea, sleep disturbance, and symptoms related to swollen belly and malignant wounds.

Additional therapies for pain

The following additional therapies may be especially useful in managing pain.

Heat therapy

A heating pad, gel packs, hot water bottles, electric heating pads, or a warm bath are examples of heat therapy. Bath water should not be too warm, or it may make the person sleepier and weaker, making getting out of the tub difficult. Here are some things to be careful about when using heat therapy:

- Heat should not be applied for more than 5 to 10 minutes.
- Heat should never be used over a new injury because it can increase bleeding.
- Heat should not be used over any area of the body that has received radiation treatment.
- Heat should not be used where circulation or the ability to feel is poor.
- Electric heating pads should not be placed on bare skin or left on when going to sleep for the night.

Cold Therapy

Ice packs, ice cubes wrapped in a towel, and gel packs are some cold therapy options. They should never be placed directly onto the skin. People receiving chemotherapy should check with their healthcare provider before using cold therapy. It should not be used where circulation or the ability to feel is reduced. Here are some things to consider when using cold therapy:

- It should not be applied for more than 5 to 10 minutes.
- Stop using if it starts causing new pain.
- If the person begins to shiver, stop using it right away.

Transcutaneous Electric Nerve Stimulation (TENS)

A TENS unit is a small power pack that sends an electrical current through electrodes onto the skin. TENS feels like a buzzing, tingling, or tapping sensation. TENS is not recommended for use on unhealthy, swollen, or infected skin. People with pacemakers should not use TENS.