

Q: I have scleroderma and chronic pain. My rheumatologist has me on immunosuppressant drugs and painkillers, but I still have no relief. I have tried exercise, yoga, vitamins, etc. I continue to look for something to help with my pain. Do you have any tips and tricks I could use in addition to my medication?

A: Your question is a common one that we hear in behavioral pain management. In addition to the medical approach to managing pain, there are other techniques to help. One of the main methods is to learn a relaxation technique that will allow your mind and body to relax physically and mentally. This does not stop the pain, but it helps you manage pain more effectively.

There are numerous relaxation techniques available. You can find some in self-help books; however, most patients with significant chronic pain need to see a professional trained in relaxation methods.

Another technique to cope with chronic pain is laughter. Science backs this up saying laughter increases the level of endorphins in the body. Endorphins are the body's natural pain medicine. It is possible to laugh even when we are in moderate to high pain, but most people have to find materials that will help them laugh such as jokes, funny movies or comedians.

Laughter leads to another technique to cope with pain - the role of positive thinking. Positive thoughts produce chemical responses in the body that are good for us. Conversely, negative thoughts produce chemical responses that are bad for the body. It is possible to have positive thoughts more often and to reduce the amount of negative thinking. Once again, there is scientific evidence that supports the power of positive thinking.

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