

# ◆ Chronic Pain Report ◆

Fall 2009

This Report by Michael T. Farrell, Ph.D. & Assoc.

## *Managing Pain With Self-Regulation Techniques*

Pain increases muscle tension and frequently muscle tension aggravates the pain level. Stress can and often does lead to increased muscle tension, (i.e. increase of muscle tension of head, neck or upper body). Therefore as stress level increases, so does muscle tension and pain level. Likewise, chronic pain patients will often develop anxiety about their pain. Consciously or unconsciously they will tighten up the muscles around the area of injury to guard the area. Consequently, this self-protection mechanism leads to increased muscle tension and chronic pain.

Chronic pain patients are taught self-regulation techniques. These techniques are designed to help them improve the management of their pain by identifying and regulating the tension in their bodies. Imagine levels of tension or stress as the rungs on a ladder. The higher the rung, the higher the stress level and physical, musculature tension. Since there is no such thing as no stress, the bottom of the ladder will be identified as 10 and the top of the ladder as 100. It's easy for patients to recognize when their stress level is 70 or 80. However, they may not recognize or experience the lower rung of the ladder. As such, self-regulation skills begin with helping patients experience the lower rungs of the ladder via the relaxation response. Simply, the relaxation response is a process of relaxation which allows the mind and body to quiet down.

There are various forms of relaxation exercises which can be presented and practiced.  
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**UNQUESTIONABLY,  
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AMONGST THE**



***Body, Mind & Spirit***

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## *Approaching Life On Different Terms*

Many years ago I wrote a book titled "How to Slow Down in a Hurry Up World". The goal of the book was to help busy professionals slow down, become less frantic, work smarter and not harder, and learn to enjoy the simpler pleasures of life on a more regular basis. I started thinking about the above and how the same principles apply to what we as behavioral specialists do to help chronic pain patients better cope with their injury and chronic pain.

Chronic pain patients may argue, "I've slowed down to a snail's pace, I can't do anything." These patients are used to working full-time, often over time, up to 60-70 hours a week. After work, they remain busy doing chores or projects around the house, or they're busy taking care of their spouse and children, or all of the above. Now they cannot do much around the house as well as continue their employment. Imagine as a busy professional you had to stop working due to an injury or illness. So what do I mean by slowing down? For one thing, injured workers need time to slow down to allow themselves time to heal, to heal physically, mentally and emotionally. When the pain from the injury becomes chronic, the later becomes even more important. The challenge becomes that of

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## Self - Regulation Techniques

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ticed by the patient. One type of relaxation exercise is called autogenic relaxation. With this type of exercise the claimant is taught to mentally repeat to themselves phrases and formulas that would increase warmth or blood flow through different parts of the body. For example, the claimant might say to his or herself "my right arm is warm and heavy, my right arm is heavy and relaxed." The claimant would be coached to mentally repeat similar phrases for different parts of their body.

Another form of relaxation training includes imagery. Claimants utilize their senses through imagery to imagine scenes that put them in a calm or peaceful place. They may also visualize an object that can connect and ease the pain at their point of injury such as a ball or white light that warms and eases the pain. Other forms of relaxation include meditation, progressive muscle relaxation and deep breathing.

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Through practicing relaxation exercises claimants will develop greater awareness of what it feels like to be on the lower rungs of the stress ladder. As a result, they'll develop a new reference point from which to compare the degrees of tension as it develops. Chronic pain patients can therefore become more aware of their levels of tension as the tension rises. Through this process patients can better regulate their body tension and to some degree their pain level. For example, a patient may suffer with a neck injury causing an increase of muscle tension in the neck. Unrelated stress could also increase the muscle tension. As muscle tension increases, an individual may experience an increase of headaches. Relaxation exercises, practiced regularly, will help the pain patient reduce the muscle tension and pain level. Additionally, chronic pain patients will be better able to tell the difference between when the tension in their neck is lower, and when the tension is higher. As patients continue to practice relaxation exercises, they will be able to distinguish amongst the various levels of neck tension. This results in the ability to recognize when the tension develops. Patients can use this recognition to determine what might be triggering the stress at a point when they may be able to do something to manage the stress before the stress level becomes overwhelming. They can utilize various behavioral, cognitive and / or relaxation skills to manage their stress level. Through this process, patients become more skillful at utilizing self-regulatory techniques to recognize and manage their tension and pain levels.

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*Written by William Melchior, Ed.D., psychologist  
with Michael T. Farrell, PhD & Associates*

## Approaching Life On Different Terms

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learning to enjoy life on different terms. In one of my earlier issues of the Chronic Pain Report I wrote about the workaholic who no longer is able to work. These people are challenged to transition from defining themselves by doing to defining themselves by being. The healing process involves the patient developing a sense of self-worth by appreciating ourselves by who we are not by what we do.

**The healing process involves developing a sense of self-worth by appreciating ourselves by who we are not by what we do.**

Likewise it is important for patients to become less frantic. Injured workers are taught to slow the thought process down, to cope better with racing thoughts by taking a deep breath, relaxing, focusing the thought processes and thinking from a more rational perspective. Thinking in a hurried, frantic pace does not necessarily solve a problem more

quickly or get things done faster. In fact, the opposite is true. I remember a saying from the Amish which goes something like this: "the faster I go the behinder I get".

Another challenge for the chronic pain patient is to learn to work smarter and not harder. Patients often find themselves having good days and bad days when it comes to their level of pain. Often, on the good days, they try to make up for the bad days and over do it (i.e. house chores, projects around the house etc.) As a result, they pay for it by being laid up for hours if not days. Patients are taught to pace their activities, set obtainable goals by breaking tasks down into smaller components. They are also taught to somewhat structure and organize their time. Sound familiar? We as busy professionals find we can get more done by applying these principles.

Finally, learning to enjoy the sim-

pler pleasures of life becomes very important. I am a firm believer that we get more out of life if we learn to "stop and smell the roses." Remember the last time you took a vacation. Remember how relaxed you felt during your vacation once you got settled by the lake, the woods, or the ocean. Generally people choose vacation spots that are a banquet to their senses. People get relaxed through their senses, what they see, feel, touch, taste or hear. Whether you are a busy professional or an injured worker, taking time out each day to enjoy life by getting back in touch with our senses becomes invaluable. It is very important for chronic pain patients to once again develop a sense of meaning and satisfaction in life. It gets back to focusing on the being and not the doing. Simple things such as a child's smile, a sunset, a good book, a pleasurable meal, sitting at the park, listening to music, or simply feeding the birds can bring about meaning in life that gets lost.

*Written by Bill Melchior, Ed.D., psychologist at Michael T. Farrell, Ph.D. and Associates*

### *Want to Learn More?*

Michael T. Farrell, Ph.D. and Associates have specialized in the psychological assessment and treatment of injured workers and disabled individuals since 1985. Whether trying to get back to work after an injury or trying to adjust to a disability, our goal is to help individuals feel satisfied and content with their lives again.

For more information visit our website at <http://michaelfarrellphd.com>. Or feel free to call us at (513) 825-6600.



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#### In This Issue...

*Managing Pain With Self-Regulation Techniques...Approaching Life On Different Terms*



Laurie A. Walker, PCC joined Michael T. Farrell, Ph.D. & Associates in March of 2004. She is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Cincinnati and is currently recruiting participants for a research study on injured workers' chronic pain and its affect on the marital relationship. Ms. Walker's areas of expertise include assessment and treatment of disabled and injured individuals, personal and marital counseling, career counseling, chemical dependency counseling, and counseling supervision.