



Play

The essence of escaping from the grip of chronic pain is feeling safe. In this state your body is full of relaxing chemicals such as oxytocin (love/bonding drug), serotonin (antidepressant), GABA hormones (anti-anxiety) and dopamine (rewards). This scenario not only creates a deep sense of well-being, it is healing.

Anxiety and anger are measures of the levels of your body's survival hormones. The source of the mental or physical threat doesn't matter. After prolonged exposure to elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol, people become sick. This has been documented for over 50 years – people dealing with chronic stress become seriously ill at much younger ages. (1,2,3)

There is research showing that cultivating optimism, having a sense of purpose, and feeling hopeful has the opposite effect. When people learn how to decrease their stress, they experience a reduction in their pain and an improvement in mood and function. (4) One paper had participants visualizing their best self for five minutes a day over a course of two weeks. They all experienced significant improvements in how they felt. (5) Your brain will develop where you place your attention. This is why I tell my patients to never discuss their pain, give unasked for advice, be critical, or complain..



Play

In our workshops, we discovered that shared play is a powerful force and allows participants to escape from their chronic pain. After people began to relax, let go, and laugh they usually experienced a decrease in their levels of pain. When you shift your brain from a threatened state to a relaxed one, it also re-awakens the play part of your brain. This phenomenon occurred in every workshop.

The basis of the DOC process is learning how to re-program your brain off of embedded pain circuits through stimulating neuroplastic changes in the brain. You can make this change happen even faster by shifting onto pre-existing play circuits. All mammals have play as a part of their development. That is our brains initially developed play is a core step in how we developed language and consciousness. Even if they feel deeply buried, your play circuits are there, waiting to be accessed. (6) Any skill that is not nurtured will fade, but those neural pathways can be re-awakened.

As you use the play part of your brain more and spend less time on your pain, your brain will physically change. When you experience chronic pain, your brain physically shrinks. Fortunately, as you heal and create more connections, your brain expands. (7)

I used to play trumpet in high school

An example of how this works is to consider a skill you had in middle or high school. Without repetition, it has faded, but the memory is still there. I played trumpet in high school and a little bit in college as well. I could play reasonably well through medical school, but it all disappeared in the midst of the rigors of residencies and fellowships. I recently picked it back up, and although I have no lip strength or dexterity, I still remember the basic techniques and hope to re-connect with them quickly. It is doable, whereas if I were to try to learn a completely new instrument, it would take much longer to learn.

My wife started playing the guitar again after a 30-year hiatus, and within a few weeks, was able to finger-pick like the old days. One day, it just all came back to her and now she has progressed beyond where she left off.

The same is true for you – your play circuits are still there, waiting to be re-vitalized.

A deliberate decision

Many years ago, I was pondering my own journey out of pain and considering some additional approaches. It hit me that the words “work” and “play” are somewhat arbitrary. I realized that my vacations were spent solely with the purpose of trying to recover from the rigors of work. This meant that I didn’t have the energy to fully engage in enjoying them.

Much of the problem had to do with how I viewed work and my strong reactions in dealing with the challenges of being a spine surgeon. I made a decision that I would work on removing those labels from my life.



If I loved my work, and spent most of my waking hours doing it, why call it work? I decided to just enjoy the whole experience. My entire team relaxed and I enjoyed my patients, fellows, and colleagues a lot more. We had fun to the point where sometimes we would have to work on toning it down in the clinic.

At the same time, one of my mentors told me, “Challenges are an opportunity to practice your stress-coping skills and part of any endeavor.” I began to embrace challenges head on and my reactions to stress dropped dramatically. By seeing problems as opportunities, I was both more effective and engaged with the difficult aspects of my job. This simple paradigm shift created world of difference.

A word of caution – I am not referring to play as a way to distract yourself from your pain. You can’t outrun your mind. Rather, it is mindset of curiosity, deep gratitude, listening, awareness, and improving your skills to calm your nervous system. The result is a sense of contentment and peace.

Moving forward

Our workshops were successful because of the sequence of awareness, hope, forgiveness and play.

The DOC process offers a framework and sequence that allows you to discover your own pathway from pain to play.

What brings you joy?

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