Relaxation Techniques for Rheumatoid Arthritis

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Reduce Stress and Pain at the Same Time

While everyone has stress in their lives, those with RA often have to deal with pain and other stresses (such as emotional and financial consequences of living with RA) on top of daily struggles.

But there are several ways those with RA can relax and de-stress that not only melt away the stress of the day, but help with RA pain, too.

Warm Baths

Warm baths are both excellent for helping eliminate stress and easing the pain of RA joints. The warmth stimulates blood flow and helps reduce muscle spasms. Warm baths are also ideal for those who suffer with joint stiffness, as a long soak in the tub can help make joints more pliable and flexible.

Setting aside a good 20-30 minutes on a particularly stressful day is great for the mind and body. Using scented oils or bath bombs (in moderation, as they can contribute to thrush in women) is also a great way to promote relaxation through a bit of aromatherapy.

Light some candles, put on some of your favorite tunes or bring in your laptop (away from the bath, of course!) and catch up on one of your favorite TV series whilst you let the stress from the day melt away.

Exercise

For many, exercise may be a four-letter word, but despite the pain associated with RA it is a fantastic way to relieve stress and even lessen pain by building up the muscles around your joints. Though it probably isn't advisable to take on something that means slamming your joints into the ground (i.e. running, unless you're confident you can do so without hurting yourself), there are plenty of ways you can get your exercise in.

It is important with RA that you do at least some weight bearing exercise, even though this admittedly can be quite painful. In order to reduce this, take an NSAID about an hour before you'll be exercising.

The weight bearing exercise you participate in doesn't need to be Olympic level, but taking short, brisk walks, riding a bike or going on the elliptical for a workout are all ways to help reduce stress. They can also help you keep your weight down, which will, in turn, help keep RA pain in check.

In addition to weight bearing exercise, swimming, yoga and tai chi are fantastic ways to get rid of stress, even on days when your joints are hurting. Slow movements or movements in the water help cushion your joints while strengthening your muscles.

Yoga classes are particularly beneficial, especially meditative yoga. They can help you focus on finding peace

and reducing stress while doing some great gentle stretches that can help make your muscles even more flexible.

Meditation

While some may dismiss meditation as hippy woo, it is actually a great way to center yourself, especially in times of stress. With guided meditations, you can shut off your mind for a good thirty minutes to an hour while you ignore the stress of your everyday life. This is a particularly good coping mechanism if you find yourself really struggling with stress as it allows your body time to really relax and disengage.

You can find guided meditation for a variety of topics on iTunes podcasts (typically for free or fairly cheap) and on YouTube. Make sure there are no other distractions, turn off the lights, light a candle, sit in a comfortable position and turn on the guided meditation. You'll find that after it is over, the stress of your day will seem to be more in perspective.

Guided meditation can also help with RA pain in that it can take your mind off of it for a good chunk of time. Think of a meditation as a vacation from your problems, 30 minutes at a time. Some people may fall asleep during a guided meditation, and if that is the case, don't worry. Your body surely needed it!

Massage

Massage has many physical and mental benefits, not the least of which is relaxation and improved blood flow. Many people with RA may find that they suffer with tight muscles in addition to painful joints and treating yourself to a massage is a great way to unwind.

One issue, however, with massage is the hefty price tag that comes with it. There are ways to cut corners and receive pleasant massages at a much lower price tag. If you have health insurance, you can always speak to your doctor about being recommended to a medical masseuse or sports clinic and often times you can bill your insurance for a massage.

Additionally, seeking a massage at a school for massage therapy means that you'll be paying a much lower price than at a spa or clinic. Although those who will be doing your massage aren't as experienced, they're still giving you all of the benefits at a much reduced rate.

Alternately, if you don't have insurance or live near a vocational school, you can ask a friend or spouse to trade massages. Although it may not have the same benefit of a professional or a professional-in-training, it will still definitely promote relaxation and blood flow.

Taking Time for Yourself

While it may seem like a no-brainer, taking time for yourself is extremely important whether or not you are dealing with RA. Dealing with a chronic illness whilst having to run a household, go to work, spend time with a spouse or partner, take care of children and/or pets can compound the already mounting stress of RA.

Thus, it is extremely important that you take time out to do something you love, even if it is only once a week. This can mean getting together with girlfriends, reading a book, working on a craft project or anything else that you find relaxing and are doing only for yourself. It is a great way not only to relax but help your mind press the "reset" button amidst all of the other stresses in your life!