

“This pause finally cured my chronic back pain!”



“Pain no longer limits my life. I am at my best, mentally and physically,” says Marla

Marla Plotnick found herself in a world of hurt, loneliness and depression from which she feared she’d never escape. Then she discovered the simple mind move that changed everything

“My back... I’m in agony. I can’t come,” Marla Plotnick apologized, canceling another lunch with friends. *This pain is taking over my whole life*, she sighed sadly.

The Montreal native was in her mid-50s when she was diagnosed with *spondylolisthesis*, a condition in which one of the spine’s vertebrae slips forward onto the bone beneath it. Marla, a runner, was told that genetics, age or sports that put stress on the bones in the lower back could all be the cause.

Spinal fusion surgery is sometimes done, but Marla’s doctor determined it wasn’t necessary in her case, that other therapies could bring relief from her pain. So she tried all of them: ice and heat packs, over-the-counter pain medications, cortisone injections, platelet-rich plasma injections, acupuncture, physical therapy and a myriad of prescription medications.

“Meditation could be more effective than morphine for someone with back pain”

—James Dillard, M.D.

Still, Marla couldn’t sit in a chair for more than a few minutes without excruciating pain. She had trouble sleeping. She’d always relied on daily walks and fitness classes to relieve stress, but the pain gradually caused her to have to stop all those activities, which lead to anxiety and depression.

Finally, in December of 2018, after six years, Marla was fed up and got herself on a waiting list to see a neurosurgeon. In the meantime, she started researching natural pain remedies to help her until her appointment—and ended up finding a miracle.

Power of the mind

During her search, Marla came across the book *Back in Control: A Surgeon’s Roadmap Out of Chronic Pain*, by David Hanscom, M.D., who asserted that you can alleviate pain by practicing mindfulness, or redirecting your attention to the sights, sounds,

smells and even tastes you’re experiencing in that moment. Dr. Hanscom purported that by refocusing on your surroundings and senses, you pull your thoughts away from the pain and experience deep relief.

At first it wasn’t easy, but if Marla felt a twinge while chopping veggies for dinner, she would focus on the sound of the knife on the cutting board or the color and aroma of the food. If gripped by pain while walking in the supermarket, she concentrated on her legs moving or the clatter of shopping carts. In those moments, she also followed Dr. Hanscom’s advice to take deep, long breaths, which reduces stress and tension in the body.

Remarkably, after just a few weeks of practicing mindfulness, Marla felt her pain begin to fade. And, after only about two months, she felt good enough to return to exercise class and her evening walks.

Today, Marla, 64, remains pain-free. “There’s no more declining social invitations or having trouble moving—and my anxiety is gone,” she beams. “I love my life!”

—Gina Roberts-Grey

Valerie Rosen Photography. Hair: Connie Lazzara. Makeup: Michael Steinberg. Getty

The science behind how mindfulness helps ease pain

Mindfulness is a type of meditation in which you simply focus on what you’re sensing and feeling in the moment. “Brain scans show that when someone is in a meditative state, they shut down pain pathways in the brain

and spinal cord that are hyper-excited,” says James Dillard, M.D., author of *The Chronic Pain Solution*. “Fewer pain signals get to the brain, reducing discomfort.” In fact, a study published in *JAMA* found that folks who practiced mindfulness for 2 hours weekly reduced

their pain by 45%, almost twice the improvement of those who used meds. And in a separate *JAMA* study, 61% of people said daily mindfulness reduced problems related to back pain (trouble walking, sleeping) and 44% were less bothered by the pain they did feel.

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