



Befriend Your Pain

Trauma often results in physical pain, both directly from the event itself and indirectly from ongoing tension. When we relate to pain as a friend bearing a message rather than an enemy to be feared, we reduce the suffering we experience.

Pain as an enemy. We often view pain as an enemy to be vanquished. We ignore it, medicate it, stretch against it, worry about it, hope it will go away, and try to figure out what we are doing wrong if it is still here. Most of all, we physically fight it by tightening our bodies in protest, which often extends and perpetuates the pain.

Sometimes we distance ourselves from pain and feel numb instead, losing contact with a specific part that hurts, or feeling distant from the whole body. The following process works for numbness as well as for pain.

Pain as a messenger. We often tell ourselves drastic stories about what pain represents: illness, injury, neglect, punishment. What if the pain is simply a messenger, asking for your attention? Set the stories aside and attend directly to the pain as a friend.

Choose to begin. You can befriend your pain as part of a meditation practice or as a separate process. The first time through, you will probably want some time and privacy. You can also check in with your pain briefly while standing in line, or on a walk, or any time you have a moment to breathe.

1. Acknowledge resistance. Take some time to notice your usual responses to pain. Gently notice thoughts, emotions, images, and stories. Receive them with compassion. Dealing with pain can be exhausting, frustrating, and frightening. Remember that you have been responding to your pain as best you can with the information and resources you have available.

As you consider bringing gentle attention to your pain, do you notice any avoidance or resistance coming up? Simply breathe with the avoidance and resistance, and include them in your circle of attention.

2. Notice the pain. When you are ready, bring your attention lightly to your pain. Notice your sensations. Is the pain monolithic, unchanging? Or does it intensify, fade, move, or pulse in response to your attention? If it flows from one place to another, linger with the relief in the first location before you follow the pain to a new place.

If you find yourself distracted or in need of a break, allow your attention to rest on the rise and fall of your breath.

3. Notice what does not hurt. Pain can hijack our attention, cutting us off from the rest of the body.

After you attend to a painful area for a while, bring your attention to an opposite non-painful area. If the left shoulder is hurting, attend to the right shoulder. If your neck is stiff, bring your attention to the base of your spine. If everything hurts, gently search your body for a place that hurts less right now.

What happens in your body as you rest your attention on this more comfortable place?

You might become aware of tension trying to hold the pain at bay. Sometimes tension releases when you connect with it, or sometimes it releases more slowly over time. Your

awareness of tension is a step toward healing.

4. Listen for messages. When you are ready, let your attention flow back to the pain. Do you notice any changes in the pain, or in how you respond to it?

Are you feeling curious about what message the pain brings? You might be wondering if it is from the past or the present. Is it getting everything it needs to heal? What else would be helpful to it?

Sit quietly and notice any images, sensations, or impressions that come up. They may surprise you, or confirm what you already knew.

The messages may flash by in an instant, or repeat louder and louder until you acknowledge them. If you receive only silence, or confusion, or fear, notice that, too. The seeming lack of response may be the message itself. Like a small child, the pain may need to sulk about being ignored for so long before it is ready to reveal anything else.

As much as you can, set aside your hopes and fears, and simply listen. The pain may tell you about one or more of the following:

- Sensitivities to your physical or emotional environment.
- Your past, with a sense of hurting "forever" or "never" healing, which are flashback markers.
- Overall stress on your system (chronic pain).
- Hope and healing, as your body adjusts to moving in new ways.
- The need for care, signaling an injury (acute pain).

When the conversation feels complete, thank the pain for speaking with you, and honor your courage for reaching

out to your pain in friendship.

Relief. Befriending your pain brings tremendous relief both physically and emotionally. Each time you shift from fear to curiosity in response to pain's messages, you calm your nervous system and build more trust and peace within your body.