

Desensitization

What is desensitization?

Desensitization is a technique used to teach the brain to “feel” touch differently. It starts with gentle touch for just a few seconds at a time. Slowly you increase the amount of time and advance the textures used (from smooth to rough).

For example, going from a soft cotton ball to towel, and then to Velcro. The idea is to have the brain start to process the feeling as normal.

Who can desensitization help?

- People with complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS).
- People with other chronic pain syndromes.
- People with scar tissue that is very sensitive.

How does it work?

Desensitization happens in frequent small amounts daily. Different textures, temperatures, and vibration may be used. As you progress, the brain gets used to these feelings. Your body also gets used to it. Over time, the stimulus becomes tolerable and may start to hurt less.

How do I perform this technique?

1. Start with something very soft, such as a cotton ball or piece of silk. Touch the affected area for just a few seconds at a time. Do this several times a day.

2. Slowly increase the amount of time touching the area. Keep a written record of textures and times. This is a good way to keep track of your progress.
3. Next start to use the next less pleasant textures. Try a rough towel, wool, textured fabric, or Velcro. Start again with short periods of time many times throughout the day. Slowly, your body should become tolerant to this feeling.

The time of progress may take several days to several weeks. This all depends on how sensitive the area is. This technique improves your ability to use the affected arm or leg.

Will it get rid of my pain?

This technique changes how your body responds to painful stimuli. Some things will still cause pain but over time the pain should decrease.

What else can I do to improve my pain?

Exercise helps you treat and manage pain. Your child’s therapist or doctor may suggest movement-based exercise. Start with a 15 to 30 minute session. Use the affected body part as much as you can during exercise. Focus on how much you have improved. Talk about what they can do rather than the pain.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person’s health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 3/2020 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing HF#8133.