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The evidence used in the preparation of this leaflet is available on request. Please email: patient.information@salisbury.nhs.uk if you would like a reference list.

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Desensitisation (page 1 of 2)

Sometimes after an injury the body's sensory system can become abnormally sensitive or painful. This sometimes happens even if the injury or damage was very small or superficial.

When part of the body becomes hypersensitive it can be extremely painful or unpleasant to touch. It may make you feel nauseous or anxious about touching the sensitive area. Sometimes even just thinking about touching the affected area can increase the pain and unpleasant sensations.

Desensitisation is a way of returning the body to a normal level of sensitivity by re-educating the sensory system of the body.

Desensitisation using textures

- Collect about 10 small pieces of fabric of different textures. e.g. cotton wool, towelling, wool, denim, shower scrunchy, silky fabric.
- Start by selecting two or three of the pieces that you can tolerate on or around the sensitive area. The pieces selected may feel uncomfortable but you should be able to tolerate them even for just a few seconds.
- Using the 'easiest' piece first, begin by rubbing or stroking it over the area matching the sensitive one but on the opposite side of the body. For example if the sensitive area is over the left wrist start by stimulating the right wrist.

Concentrate on what this 'normal' sensation feels like.

- Next, move across to the affected part of the body and begin stroking around the sensitive/painful area. Gradually move towards and over the most sensitive area. You may have to try several times before you can move completely over the most sensitive areas.
- Repeat with the second and third textures. Swap between affected and unaffected sides to remind yourself what 'normal' feels like.
- Use this technique several times a day.
- When you can easily tolerate one or all of the three textures, select new ones that are a bit harder to tolerate and repeat the process.

Do

- Use this method little and often - up to about 2 minutes per texture, several times a day.

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- Look at the affected area whilst stimulating it. This will increase the sensory information going to the nervous system.
- Think about what the texture felt like on the 'normal', unaffected, side
- Practise in a quiet place where you can feel relaxed.

Don't

- Stimulate the affected area for long periods or if the pain becomes intolerable.
- Use textures that you can't tolerate or that make you pull away.
- Continue if you have lost concentration.

Ways to incorporate desensitisation into daily activities

- Massage the area using different pressures and movements. Use pleasant smelling moisturisers or oils. Ask your partner, a friend or someone you trust, to massage the area for you whilst you watch.
- **In the bath or shower:**
Allow water to run onto the affected area. Compare the sensation with the unaffected side.
Use a flannel or scrunchy around and over the affected area.
Use a soft towel to pat the area dry.
- **Dressing:**
Allow clothing to touch the affected area.
Wear different textures/types of clothing over the area, for instance if the sensitive area is on the foot try wearing thicker/thinner/rougher/smooth socks.
- **In bed:**
Allow the sheets to touch the affected area. Concentrate on what the sheets feel like on the 'normal' area of the body.
- **Hypersensitive lower limbs/feet:**
Walk barefoot around the house and garden to experience different textures, such as carpet, wooden flooring, grass, sand.
- **Hypersensitive hands/arms:**
Activities such as washing up, baking (rubbing in and kneading dough) and gardening (weeding, planting) will enable you to expose the sensitive area to different sensations and textures.
- Your therapist will be able to help you think of more ways to incorporate desensitisation into everyday activities.

Mirror therapy

Your therapist will advise and give you an information sheet on how to use mirrors to help with desensitisation.

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