



DESENSITIZATION

(Moscony, 2015)

Desensitize: "to make (a sensitized or hypersensitive individual) insensitive or nonreactive to a sensitizing agent" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

WHAT IS IT

Damaged tissues can have heightened reactions to touch, which is why things that shouldn't be painful feel painful to you. This occurs because your sensory nerves are more irritable. This concept is called **hypersensitivity**.

Desensitization is the technique or method used to reduce hypersensitivity. It involves re-educating the nervous system by applying non-noxious stimuli to the tissues to increase their threshold for sensory stimuli. If desensitization techniques are not performed, the brain will continue to interpret touch as painful, and this pain message can become permanently fixed. Therefore, the area must get used to being touched again.



TECHNIQUES

- Rub various textures (velvet, cotton, corduroy, polyester, wool) along the hypersensitive area
 - Start with the softest texture and apply the lightest pressure possible.
 - Once able to tolerate, continue with the softest texture but apply increased pressure.
 - Once able to tolerate, switch to a slightly less soft texture and apply the lightest pressure possible.
 - Once able to tolerate, continue with same texture but apply increased pressure.
 - Continue until you reach the roughest texture applied with the most pressure.
- Complete the same activity as above but with tapping.
 - Remember to go from soft items to harder items and from light pressure to firm pressure.
- Fill a container with a substance (dry rice, dry beans, sand, poly pellets, or something similar). Place the hypersensitive area in the container and slowly move your hand around inside of the container.
- Use a soft brush (toothbrush or baby's hair brush) to gently brush over the irritated area.
- Massage the area with a cream you like.
- Use a mini massager to massage along the sensitive area.

*It is normal for these exercises to be somewhat uncomfortable while performing them or shortly after. STOP if you become dizzy, nauseous, warm, or lightheaded. Report this to your therapist. To decrease pain, wrap the area in a warm towel. Rest and restart once you feel better.

You can also resolve pain that develops a few hours later by wrapping the area in a warm towel.

HOW OFTEN

It is important to touch your irritated skin regularly! At first, try short sessions (approximately 2-3 minutes) every waking hour or every other hour. As your tolerance increases, build up to longer sessions (5-10 minutes each).

TIPS

Make sure you are relaxed (put on calming music, watch a favorite TV show, light a candle...)

References

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Desensitize. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved November 20, 2020, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/desensitize>

Moscony, A. M. B. (2015). Peripheral nerve problems. In C. Cooper (Ed.), *Fundamentals of hand therapy: Clinical reasoning and treatment guidelines for common diagnoses of the upper extremity* (2nd ed., pp. 272-311). Elsevier.