



Information for Patients

MANAGING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF ILLNESS



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Background Information

Your emotional health is crucial to your recovery from physical illness or injury. When people are ill they are more prone to anxiety and depression. Addressing worries, physical tension and stress by promoting constructive thinking, good lifestyle habits around diet, exercise, relaxation and sleep, and positive experiences through social support, can improve your quality of life and speed up recovery.

The Problem of Worrying

Worrying or negative, repetitive thinking about possible problems is one of the most destructive and harmful ways of thinking. People who worry a lot tend to experience high levels of anxiety and tension, which adversely affect their physical health. This can add further complications when combined with a medical condition.

Reducing Worry

Trying to stop worrying about things can be a seemingly impossible task. Psychologists are highly skilled and can assist in this area, having been trained extensively in the management of anxiety and worry. Some tips to get you started are outlined below:

- If you lack information about health issues (i.e. prognosis or likely outcomes and time-frames of medical conditions), pursue further information and education through appropriate sources (i.e. medical or clinical specialists)
- Try to realistically assess your worries. Talk to a good friend about your concerns and obtain their perspective on the problem
- Increase the amount and variety of activity in each day so that you have other things to focus on, such as reading, walking, watching a movie or any other activity that does not adversely impact upon your medical condition
- Limit your worry to a "worry period". Select a specific period each day in which the worrying takes place. When you become aware that you are worrying, make a conscious effort to postpone it until your "worry period"
- Postponing your worry to the "worry period" can help to reduce the frequency and duration of your worrying



- During your “worry period” you can begin to problem solve your worries in order to resolve them. Do this by systematically writing down your concerns on a piece of paper. Think about the possible outcomes of your concerns, identifying both positive and negative effects. Select your preferred outcome. Make this a goal that you can work on achieving. In doing this you begin to diminish the strength of your worry
- Develop a list of ways that you can reach this goal. Begin by compiling a long list that focuses on a range of different ways you can reach your goal, even ones that may seem unrealistic. From this list select one or two strategies that will resolve the problem that is causing you to worry. Try these strategies for a while to see how well they work. If they are not resolving the problem and reducing your worry, go back to your list and try different strategies
- You can also use your “worry period” to analyse your thoughts so that negative thinking can be reduced
- How likely is it that what you are worrying about will happen?
- If it does happen, can you manage it? Has it happened before? If so, how did you manage it then? How can you better manage it?
- Is there anything positive that can come out of this situation? If so, what is it? How can you make sure it happens?
- As you work through these questions identify answers that suggest things will be okay
- Make up statements from these answers that you can repeat to yourself when you are worrying. For example, statements such as “if it happens, just deal with it” and “I’ve spent months worrying about this and it hasn’t happened yet so it is unlikely to happen” can help to reduce your worry and allow you to focus on better outcomes.

Negative Effects of Stress & Tension

Stress and tension refer to physical stimulation in the form of muscle tension and contraction. Stressful muscle tension can be experienced in a variety of areas including the eyes, jaw, neck, shoulders, lower back and abdominal area. Prolonged muscle tension can lead to aches and pains ranging from mild headaches or a stiff back to chronic migraines, muscle spasms and injury.

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Reduction of Physical Tension & Stress

Reducing the physical sign of stress through recognising and relaxing muscles in the body is not as easy as it sounds. You have to learn to recognise when you are stressed and which muscle groups are the most tense. Then you need to develop skills in systematically relaxing all your muscles, not just the ones that are tense. This takes a lot of practice and skill to master. A psychologist can provide expert training in relaxation and stress reduction.

Here are some starting points to assist you in reducing stress and physical tension:

- Learn to recognise the signs of physical tension in your body. Stop and think about how all the different muscles in your body are feeling at regular intervals, every day. By doing this you will identify the muscle groups that hold the most tension when you are feeling stressed
- Learn how to do progressive muscle relaxation. This involves systematically contracting and relaxing all the muscles in your body to induce a strong feeling of physical relaxation. It can help to see your psychologist for initial training and instruction in this area.

Diet, Exercise and Sleep: The Three Big Problem Areas

Diet, exercise and sleep are three areas that can cause further problems when people have medical conditions. Sometimes medications, treatments and symptoms such as pain, can adversely impact upon appetite, energy levels and sleeping patterns.

Improving Diet, Exercise and Sleep

When coping with medical conditions it is essential that you maintain a healthy diet and get regular exercise and sleep.

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Here are some basic points and strategies to remember:

- Make sure you eat regularly throughout the day. Choose foods that are nutritious and you enjoy eating. Maintain a low fat and calorie intake. If you are restricted in food choices, make sure that inappropriate foods aren't accessible. Throw them away so you aren't tempted. Tell family members or friends about your diet and get them to help you stick to it
- During exercise your body releases chemicals that assist in making you feel good, therefore keeping your body active is essential for both injury prevention and general wellbeing. In many cases, your medical condition may restrict your ability to engage in exercise you previously enjoyed. If this is the case, then it is vital that you learn new exercises and engage in them regularly, See your medical practitioner for advice on what exercises you can do and develop a regular activity schedule
- Ensuring you get enough sleep is critical when you have a medical condition. Make sure you maximise your potential for good sleep by minimising naps during the day, exercising during the day and avoiding stimulants such as tea and coffee in the evenings, so that your body is physically tired and ready for sleep at night
- If you are still excessively sleepy, or if you have sleep apnoea or troublesome snoring, see a Sleep Physician.

Loss of Social Support

When you have a medical condition it can often be a stressful, frustrating, isolating and lonely experience. When you are not feeling well, your opportunities for social contact are reduced through both your own limitations and restrictions (i.e. being unable to work or engage in social activities) and lack of motivation.

Getting the Social Support You Need

Social support has been proven to be an effective form of assistance in maintaining your quality of life when you are coping with a medical condition. Previously available forms of support, such as work colleagues or friendships, may not be available, however other sources of social support may still be accessible. The following points provide some suggestions for cultivating social support:

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- Think about all the people you still have possible contact with and develop plans to contact them and catch up
- When you do have contact with friends, advise them of where you are at and provide them with some hints on how they can best support you. Remember, if you don't tell them how to support you appropriately, then they will never know
- Keep regular schedules of contact throughout the week. Book regular lunches, coffees and catch- ups with people. Plan ahead to avoid unpleasant isolated gaps during the week
- If your available social support is inadequate, think about new sources of support such as support groups, hobby and interest groups and volunteer opportunities.
- A psychologist can assist in developing and implementing a plan to explore and develop more social support opportunities for you.

This tip sheet is based on one of a series published by the Australian Psychological Society.

For more information, visit Beyond Blue (www.beyondblue.org.au).

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