

Emotions and Arthritis

ARTHRITIS ACTION FACTSHEETS



Some people have concerns about pain, some feel frustrated that they can't do what they used to do and others worry about what might happen in the future. If these normal feelings become overwhelming, they can affect sleep, increase pain and worsen worries. Learning relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or meditation, or knowing how to manage your negative thoughts can help you cope better with your feelings, reduce the effects of your worries and help you better manage the symptoms of your arthritis.

There are lots of things that you can try to help you cope better with your feelings. As with any new skill, you may need to keep trying to see what works best for you, so don't give up too soon if something doesn't seem to be working straight away.

In this Factsheet we will explore:

- > Relaxation Techniques
- > Distraction Techniques
- > Challenging unhelpful thoughts and ideas and positive thinking
- > Exercise
- > Setting goals, time management and pacing activities
- > Healthy eating

Relaxation

Relaxation techniques including deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualisation and meditation can decrease your heart rate, blood pressure and muscle tension and can help you cope better with some of the negative feelings you may have. Relaxation can also help ease tension and pain in certain parts of the body such as the spine, shoulders and joints.

Deep breathing exercises

When we are feeling relaxed and happy, our breathing will automatically slow down and muscle tension will reduce. On the other hand, when we feel worried or upset, we often take small shallow breaths which can increase feelings of tension or panic. Learning how to slow our breathing down can reduce muscle tension and help us feel calmer.

- 1)** Lie down or sit comfortably in a chair. Your body should be as relaxed as possible. Close your eyes. Try to make sure that your shoulders are down and keep them relaxed.
- 2)** Place one hand on your chest and the other over the middle of your tummy. Breathe gently through your nose and notice how your hands rise and fall.
- 3)** Breathe in deeply and slowly and try to make the hand on your tummy rise up more than the hand on your chest. Try breathing in for a slow count of four and then hold your breath in for a count of four.
- 4)** Slowly breathe out through your open mouth for a count of eight, letting the hand on your tummy slowly fall as you breathe out.
- 5)** As you breathe out, listen to the sound of your breath and feel the tension in your body reduce. You can practice deep breathing for a few minutes every day and once you feel confident, you can use the techniques to calm yourself in other situations.

Progressive muscle relaxation

The aim of this exercise is to gradually tense and relax the muscles in each part of the body in turn so that at the end your whole body will feel relaxed.

- 1)** Lie down or sit comfortably in a chair. Your body should be as relaxed as possible. Close your eyes.
- 2)** Clench one fist for a couple of seconds then relax. Next tense and relax your forearm muscles, then your upper arm and shoulder, neck, forehead, eyes and jaw, and then work all the way down to the opposite hand.
- 3)** Tense and relax in turn the chest muscles and upper spine, then the abdominal muscles and lower back, then the buttocks.
- 4)** Work your way gradually down each leg to the foot in turn.

Visualisation

Our thoughts can affect how we feel and act, and calming the mind by imagining a relaxing scene can help reduce tension, worry and pain.

- 1)** Lie down or sit comfortably in a chair. Close your eyes. Try to notice any tension in your body and let it relax before you start.
- 2)** Think of a relaxing scene for example a beach, mountain, wood or anywhere that you have felt calm and peaceful.
- 3)** Remember what that place felt like with all your senses—what it looked like, what you could hear, smell or taste and how you felt inside. You may imagine sitting down or going for a stroll.
- 4)** The more involved in your image you can become, the more your body will relax and you will be able to let go of your problems and worries.

Meditation

Meditation has been practiced for thousands of years and has been proven to help reduce blood pressure, improve pain and help with depression. There are many different types of meditation and many involve relaxing and mentally focusing on a word or object so that the brain can become calm.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a type of meditation that involves paying attention to what is happening in the moment, for example being aware of feelings of pain or tension or listening to the body. This focus helps the body and mind to relax. Some people whose minds are very active, or if pain is severe may find meditation tricky at first but with practice it gets much easier so don't give up if you find it tricky at the beginning. And you should start to feel the benefits.

Distraction Techniques

If your pain is severe or if you are very upset or find it difficult to relax, you may find that distraction techniques where you do something to take your mind off things may help.

In the short-term, many people find that listening to the radio, reading a book or watching television, reciting the alphabet or counting games can help distract them from pain and worry.

In the long-term, useful distraction techniques may include taking up a new hobby, doing puzzles or colouring, joining a social or voluntary group to reduce isolation, or trying to go out even if you don't really feel like it. Even a few minutes of being distracted from our feelings can really help.

Challenging unhelpful thoughts and ideas and positive thinking

Most of us are guilty of having negative thoughts about ourselves at some time but if you often find yourself feeling frustrated and using phrases such as "I'm useless...", "I ought to..." or "I should..." then you may be using unhelpful thinking styles as a habit and this can then make you feel worse and make you achieve less.

There are many things in life which we can't control, but we can control the way that our thoughts affect us and this can help us feel more in control of our lives. It is possible to change unhelpful thoughts and negative thinking styles and let more positive thoughts take their place using a talking therapy called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). Your GP can help you find out more about CBT.

Setting goals that you can easily achieve, writing down 3 things each day that you are thankful for, and thinking about the positive things that you have done in life, however small, can also help beat negative thoughts.

Exercise

If we feel low then exercise may be the last thing that we feel like doing, but it may be one of the most important things that we can do to help ourselves.

Exercise makes our body release natural pain-relieving chemicals called endorphins that can also help relax the mind. Exercise can be an effective treatment for depression, and also has the benefits of improving muscle strength, flexibility and balance. Exercising with others can reduce feelings of isolation and can be a form of distraction from pain and worries. See our fact sheet on 'Staying Active with Arthritis' to learn more.

Setting Goals, Time Management, and Pacing Activities

Many people with arthritis have good days and bad days when less activity is possible. It is normal to feel that on a good day we want to catch up with the jobs that we haven't done when we are not feeling so well. This means that we often do more than we should, for example too much housework, DIY or gardening and we then suffer for it the next day with more pain and fatigue. This is called "boom and bust" and means that it is difficult to plan activities in advance because we never know how we might feel. One of the most important ways of avoiding boom and bust is to pace ourselves better, especially on a good day.

Pacing means setting small but achievable goals and dividing the task into small parts or chunks. This could mean for example vacuuming one room at a time or doing a small amount of ironing then resting and changing to a new job. It is vital that you don't do too much on a good day. It is also important that you don't set yourself goals that are too hard or unachievable as this will be demoralising and may put you off trying again. Try to plan your activities realistically and allow enough time for tasks as this will give you more control and reduce your stress levels.

See our fact sheet on 'Pacing' to learn more.

Healthy eating

Healthy eating improves energy levels and general health and can contribute to feelings of well-being. Healthy eating can also help us keep to a healthy weight which can reduce joint pain and improve self-esteem.

See our fact sheet on 'Diet and Arthritis' to learn more.

What if my low mood gets worse?

Living with a painful condition can make most people feel low at times. If however you have been feeling that you have little pleasure in life, have feelings of hopelessness or failure, sleep or eating problems, you may be depressed and not just low. If so, it is important that you seek medical advice

because there are lots of things that can help, not necessarily medicines, and if your depression improves, your outlook and control of your arthritis will also improve.

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