

## ***Lifestyle Factors Impacting Upon Medical Conditions***

Medical conditions, illnesses and injuries can place added strain on our already at times stressful and busy lives. When we have a medical condition it usually places limitations on our capabilities and causes disruptions to our lifestyle. These limitations and disruptions can range from simple restrictions and changes to our normal routine through to major changes to our basic living pattern and lifestyle including areas of diet, work, family and, recreation and leisure.

In managing medical conditions there are several factors related to our lifestyle that can impede our recover or cause an increase in symptoms. These factors include worry and anxiety, stress and tension, diet and exercise, sleep, and social support.

### **Lifestyle Problem Areas and Solutions**

#### ***Negative Thinking - Worrying***

The Problem of Worrying - Worrying or negative repetitive thinking about possible adverse situations 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 that 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. Your Psychologist is highly skilled in this area having been trained extensively in the management of anxiety and worry. Some initial strategies to get you started are outlined below:

- When you find yourself worrying about things don't try to stop yourself initially but rather systematically write down the likely consequences or concerns on a piece of paper. Make sure that in doing this you not only write down the possible negative outcomes but also the positive outcomes no matter how likely or unlikely. Next look at each scenario and think about any possible good points and remind yourself that though you may not like it you can and will be able to cope.
- If you are lacking in any information about issues (ie., prognosis or likely outcomes and timeframes of medical conditions) then pursue further information and education through appropriate sources (ie., medical or clinical specialists).
- Try to assess realistically your worries and develop other areas to think about. Find a good friend to talk to (or better still, see your psychologist) to pursue this process.
- Increase the amount of activity and variety in each day to provide 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.

## ***Stress and Tension***

*Negative Effects of Stress and Tension* Stress and tension refer to physical arousal 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 stiff back to chronic migraines and muscular spasms and injury.

*Reduction Of Physical Tension and Stress* Reducing the physical sign of stress through recognizing and relaxing muscles in the body is not as easy as it sounds. Firstly 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 - particularly those that are most tense. This area takes a lot of practice and skill to master and your psychologist can provide expert skills training in relaxation and stress reduction. The following information provides some starting points to assist you in reducing stress and physical tension:

- Learn to recognise the signs of physical tension in your body. This is done by stopping and carefully thinking about how all the different muscles in your body are feeling at regular intervals everyday. By doing this you will identify the muscle groups that hold the most tension when you are feeling stressed.
- Practice regular slow and deep breathing. Do this at regular intervals throughout the day particularly when you begin to feel tense and stressed. As you exhale say the word 'calm' to yourself in a soothing manner.
- Begin learning to relax. Develop pleasant imagery (ie., scenery or pleasant memories) and music which you find soothing and calming and invoke these images and sounds when stressed.
- Learn a form of progressive muscle relaxation. This is where you systematically contract and relax all the muscles in your body to induce a strong feeling of physical relaxation. It is generally best to see your psychologist for initial training and instruction in this area.

## ***Diet, Exercise & Sleep***

*The three big problem areas* Diet, exercise and sleep are three big areas often causing 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 we do everything we can to maintain a healthy diet, get regular exercise, and regular and satisfactory sleep. Some basic strategies and points to remember are outlined below and can be expanded upon by your Psychologist.

- 4 *Diet* Make sure you eat regularly throughout the day. Choose foods that are nutritious and preferably enjoyable to eat. If you don't feel like eating then continue to nibble at foods you can tolerate. If you are restricted in food choices then make sure that no inappropriate foods are accessible (ie., throw them away so you can't be tempted). Also if possible advise family members or friends of what your diet should be and get them to prompt you regularly.

- 4 **Exercise** Keeping your body active is essential for both injury prevention and health promotion through the release of body chemicals which assist in making you feel good. Maintaining activity is vital to promote well being. In many cases your medical condition may restrict your ability to engage in previously enjoyed exercises. In this case it is vital to learn other alternate exercises and engage in these regularly. See your medical or clinical specialist for advise on what exercises you can do and develop a regular schedule of activity.
- 4 **Sleep** 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: not consuming stimulants such as tea and coffee in the evenings: and exercising during the day so your body is physically tired and ready for sleep at night.

## **Social Support**

Loss of Social Support When you have a medical condition it can often be a stressful, frustrating, isolating and lonely experience. Often when you're not feeling well your opportunities for social contact are reduced through both your own limitations and restrictions (ie., unable to work with colleagues or engage in social recreational activities) , and lack of motivation.

Getting the Social Support You Need When you are coping with a medical condition social support has been proven to be an effective form of assistance in maintaining your quality of life. Whilst often previously available forms of support such as work colleagues and recreational friendships may not necessarily be available, other sources of social support may still be accessible. The following points provide some suggestions for cultivating quality sources of social support and ensuring these needs are met:

- Take the time to think about all the possible people you still have contact with and develop plans to contact some and catch up.
- When you do have contact with friends advise them of where you're 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'll never know!
- Keep regular schedules of contact throughout the week. Book regular lunches, coffees and catch ups with people. Plan ahead to avoid unpleasant isolating gaps through the week.
- If your available social support is inadequate then think about new sources of support such as support groups, hobby and interest groups and volunteer opportunities. Your psychologist can assist in developing and implementing a plan to explore and develop more social support opportunities for you.