Finding Ways to Be Optimistic Despite RA

by ERIC PATTERSON

Keeping Positive Despite Rheumatoid Arthritis

Everyone wants to be optimistic. Staying optimistic means that you look positively at the world. Optimistic people see hope in others. They believe that others will bring good into the world.

Some people are born with optimism and others have to work for it. Gaining optimism is a challenging process. Keeping optimistic during tough times is even trickier. You want to be able to look adversity in the face without a hesitation and know that you will triumph, but this is not always the case. Some battles seem unwinnable.

Dealing with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) may seem like one of those battles. RA brings with it so much pain, discomfort, frustration and uncertainty that pessimism begins to take hold. Suddenly, the glass seems half empty as symptoms impact your views of the world.

In this case, optimism does not come back on its own. If you want it back, you have to take it back. Fighting the battles will enable you to win the war against RA and pessimism.

Step One: Grieving

Any diagnosis of a chronic medical condition, like RA, is a loss. Forget the notion that losses are reserved only for when a death occurs. RA is a loss of functioning, a loss of a healthier you and the realization that you are vulnerable to other conditions.

Younger people diagnosed with RA may see the condition as the first sign that they are not impervious to illness while older adults may see RA as another additional issue to mange.

Whatever the case, the need to grieve and mourn exists.

- **Move through denial –** RA symptoms can present differently for different people. It can take time before symptoms are clearly understood and identified when professionals question other aspects of your physical health. Work through denial by acknowledging the current state of your physical health and what you are feeling. Talk openly about it with others to solidify it as fact.
- **Move through anger –** When denial is addressed, anger is a likely reaction. Anger has a bad reputation because people tend to suppress their feelings for too long leading to an explosive burst of anger later where feelings are hurt and relationships broken. Find new ways to channel the feeling into productive actions. You may have good luck releasing anger through art, journaling or physical activity.
- **Move through sadness –** A loss is sad. It is supposed to be. Write down your thoughts that contribute to depression. Are you worried about the future? Does the thought of constant pain seem unbearable? Debate and challenge these thoughts to arrive at conclusions that make sense and will add to happiness.
- **Move through bargaining –** Bargaining is all about making a deal. Bargaining is an attempt to take control over something that is fully out of your hands. Once you realize the limits of your control, you can

move to the next step.

- **Move to acceptance –** You must accept the things you cannot change. You *cannot* make RA go away. You *can* alleviate symptoms by following doctor's orders and recommendations. Acceptance is not only acknowledging the diagnosis, but also in understanding the widespread influence it has on your life now and will in the future. It does not mean you like it. It only means that you understand it.

Step 2: Physical Health

It's true that keeping positive is possible regardless of your physical condition, but if optimism has been troubling to find, making small movements to improving your physical condition may build momentum towards optimism.

Realistically, building better physical health involves a triangle of components: diet, exercise and sleep. Each of these aspects are simple to develop but are easily overlooked.

Beginning with diet, look into foods that make sense for you. Avoid being a person that seeks out the quick fix or the newest fad diet. Instead, make small adjustments including preparing your own meals more often while looking into foods that can decrease inflammation and avoid foods that add to it.

Reducing or eliminating gluten and aspartame from your diet may help this process. It may also help to avoid a group of plants known as nightshade vegetables that include potatoes, eggplant, peppers and tomatoes.

The right amount of exercise will keep your joints from getting stiff and strengthen the surrounding muscles and connective tissue. Exercise, paired with changing diet, will also help melt away unwanted pounds. Less weight means less impact on your ailing joints and less pain.

Don't think that your RA makes exercise impossible. Swimming, walking, elliptical trainers are all low impact exercises that will help preserve your joint health.

Now that you are eating right and exercising, you can turn your focus to sleep. You may not realize that the previous changes will make better sleep possible, since your diet and exercise levels influence your sleep.

Talk to your doctor about the right amount of sleep for you and track your trends. Too much sleep is just as damaging as too little.

Step 3: Mental Health

If your grieving and physical health activities have been beneficial, you are now ready to move to the mental health step. Luckily, you can make huge amounts of movement towards building or maintaining optimism with mental health activities alone.

- **Find positive people.** Being around people that are overly negative, depressed or angry can stifle your change towards optimism. The same is true when you spend too much time alone. The goal should be finding and surrounding yourself with people that share the same lust for optimism that you aspire to have. Making connections online is a fine starting place, but the ultimate desire must be supports in your community. This way you can get a better understanding of what makes them the optimists they are.
- **Set goals.** Goals are wonderful tools because they provide direction and guidance. Having a better understanding of your limitations and abilities will aid in the goal setting process. What do you want to go? What do you want to do? How do you want to think and feel? As long as your goals are specific, attainable, measureable and realistic, any goal can be a good goal. Consult others to see if your goals are worthwhile and practical.
- **Accomplish goals.** Setting goals begins to foster a feeling of purpose and motivation. To continue the benefit, you must accomplish the goals you set. Completing goals gives you a sense of control and power over the world around you. The RA diagnosis might have you feeling hopeless, hapless and helpless, but achieving even small goals will defeat these negative views. Speaking of small goals, the goals that you choose initially should be especially simple and easy to accomplish. The inertia established will carry you

towards completing bigger and more difficult goals. Small goals are the crawling before the walking.

- **Seek gratitude.** Gratitude is a sense of thankfulness and appreciation of others, the world and yourself. It is easy to see how gratitude and optimism are related. To add new levels of gratitude to your life, you must actively seek it out. Make it a point to find five things that you are thankful for or that you appreciate each day. Write them down or document them other ways so that you can recall them later. This emphasizes the positives.
- **Avoid negatives.** Negative people, places and things are sure-fire optimism breakers. Assert your power and self-worth by acknowledging that you are too good to be around people that bring you down. Recognize that you deserve more than these people can offer. This process also boosts your self-esteem. Self-esteem, like gratitude, is intimately linked to optimism.

Conclusion

Being faced with a chronic medical condition is not an easy issue to face. Because of the challenge, you need to be well armed with optimism. Optimism changes your perspectives and modifies the way you see life.

Keeping positive despite rheumatoid arthritis is critical; the right amount of optimism makes even the worst days with RA more manageable.