How to Manage Rheumatoid Arthritis and Stress

by MARIAH LEACH

Tips for Managing Stress With Rheumatoid Arthritis

Stress is an inevitable part of our daily lives — deadlines at work, raising children, negotiating personal relationships, or even just getting stuck in traffic.

Most of us already know that stress can have a negative impact on our overall health. Stress can lead to physical symptoms, such as headache, upset stomach, elevated blood pressure, and muscle tension. Stress can also affect your mood, sex drive, appetite, and your ability to get a good night's sleep.

Unfortunately, living with a chronic illness like rheumatoid arthritis (RA) comes with added sources of stress. In addition to the physiological stress of pain, inflammation, and fatigue, there are a number of ways RA can increase your mental and emotional stress.

Uncertainty concerning the future impact of RA, whether a particular treatment will work, or the potential side effects of a medication can all be very stressful. Dealing with insensitive comments or a lack of understanding from friends and family can also weigh on you.

Personally, the amount of time I have to commit to medical appointments and the financial impact of my medical care is one of my biggest sources of anxiety.

Unfortunately, stress can also have a negative impact when it comes to RA.

Although researchers still don't fully understand the precise connection, a 2010 review of 16 studies published in the journal *Arthritis Research & Therapy* concluded that there is enough evidence to support the belief that stress likely plays a role in triggering RA flares or worsening RA symptoms. This is certainly something I can confirm from personal experience!

Being stressed seems to trigger an endless cycle: stress makes you feel crummy, which generates additional stress, which only makes you feel worse. For this reason, it is especially important that people living with RA have tools for dealing with stress.

Relaxation Techniques

A great place to start in combating stress is to use relaxation techniques to activate your body's natural relaxation response. My favorite thing about relaxation techniques is that there are so many different options, so everyone can find the technique that works best for them.

I like to practice mindfulness, where I focus my awareness on the present moment and pay attention to my thoughts and feelings without judgment. Mindfulness helps me let go of things I can't control and find ways to keep facing forward.

Other types of relaxation techniques include meditation, deep breathing, repeating a mantra, purposefully tensing and relaxing your muscles, guided imagery, yoga, and tai chi. Once you figure out which option works best for you, it's important to keep in mind that these techniques work best to reduce stress when you practice them on a regular basis.

Adequate Rest and Regular Exercise

Adequate rest and regular exercise can create a positive cycle to help you deal with stress. Getting enough sleep will help make you less susceptible to sources of stress, which will give you more energy to exercise.

Regular exercise can help you manage physical pain, which will improve your sleep, which will in turn reduce stress! I know getting exercise can be a challenge when you are living with RA — that's why I make exercise a priority and encourage myself to do something active even when I don't feel like it.

Walking is generally an easy way to get started, and swimming and biking are also great low-impact options. If you are having trouble being active because of your RA, ask your doctor for recommendations of what types of exercises you can do, or perhaps make an appointment with a physical therapist.

Pace Yourself, Prioritize, and Give Yourself Credit

Living with RA can sometimes make it difficult to accomplish everything you want to, which can lead to additional stress, so it's important to pace yourself and prioritize.

I keep a to-do list and am constantly ranking the items on my list to see what actually needs to be done, which items can be postponed or eliminated, and which items I can request help to complete. I also try to give myself credit for whatever I am able to accomplish. For example, I try to think of taking time to rest as an accomplishment, rather than a waste of time.

Get Support

If you use these techniques but are still feeling overwhelmed by stress, it's important to seek out support. It may help to talk to a friend or family member who is a good listener, even if they don't live with RA themselves.

Online communities (like this one!) are great for connecting you with other people who do actually live with RA and are struggling with similar issues. It's also important to find a doctor you feel comfortable communicating with, so medical appointments don't increase your stress levels and you can honestly share how you are feeling.

It's not uncommon for people living with RA to deal with anxiety or depression, and your doctor may be able to prescribe a medication that would help or direct you to counseling services.

Whatever methods you choose, it is important for your health to make sure you manage stress as much as possible — particularly if you are living with RA!