Why Worry Can Be Your Biggest Challenge

by ANGELA FINLAY

Stress Reduction Tips

Everybody gets stressed out sometimes, but when you're living with a chronic illness, that emotional stress can seep into your physical symptoms. Rheumatoid arthritis is a pervasive disorder that can be difficult to control, and worry can complicate things even more. Learn how anxiety might be aggravating your RA, why you should track it, and what you can do to get rid of it.

How Worry and Anxiety Affects other RA Symptoms

A recent Dutch study examined 80 rheumatoid arthritis patients over the course of 6 months to determine how daily stress and worry might contribute to flare-ups and general RA discomfort. Measuring some key stress hormones and molecules responsible for rheumatoid arthritis pain (namely, cortisol and cytokines), researchers tracked the relationship between stress levels and physical symptoms.

According to the study, worrying greatly impacts physical wellbeing. Not only did patients report more fatigue as their level of daily stress increased, but the more they worried, the more pain and inflammation they experienced over the following weeks, too. One hypothesis suggests that emotional turmoil is responsible for the spike in physical discomfort, while another points to the fact that worry might distract patients from their pain prevention plan.

Steps to Reduce Worry and Improve Comfort

Although there seems to be a connection between worry and pain, it's difficult to pinpoint the precise chain of events that lead from a stressful morning to afternoon agony. The best avenue to greater comfort and a better quality of life is to reduce all forms of stress with helpful methods like:

Cognitive behavioral therapy. Also known as CBT, this guided therapy is a wonderful way to retrain the way you think about pain, and in turn, how you experience your pain. CBT relies on the strong connection between your mind and body, which makes it an ideal avenue to address the connection between psychological cause (worry) and physical effect (pain and fatigue).

Relaxation techniques. Guided meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and massage therapy are effective ways to redirect your focus and stimulate positive energy. Talk to your doctor about joining a class or working with a specialist to learn how to physically relax your muscles and mind. Once you can incorporate your chosen therapies into daily life, you will develop more control over your symptoms.

Learning to be mindful. When you live in the present moment with all your senses, you can free your mind from worry and anxiety. The idea isn't necessarily to distract, but rather notice the things outside of yourself and enjoy their presence. For instance, choose a symbol or sound, and completely tune your eyes or ears to that target for the next few minutes.

Get clarity. When you set out clear goals according to your own values and desires, you stand a much better chance of staying happy and motivated because you know where you're heading. Use a journal to track how you feel and what you want to accomplish, but go easy on yourself and keep goals small. Remember that your disease is personal; don't let others dictate what makes you comfortable, happy or fulfilled.

When you suffer from rheumatoid arthritis, you can expect challenging days. On the other hand, a positive outlook can counteract the fatigue and pain that can creep up, so instead of simply treating your physical symptoms, turn some of your attention to your mental and emotional wellbeing each and every day.