How the Impact of RA Goes Beyond the Physical

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Rheumatoid Arthritis and Emotional Stress

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is known primarily as a physical disease that impacts not only the joints but a wide range of body systems. The effects of this can be visible or invisible, meaning it shows no outward signs a person is sick or disabled.

No matter what the physical toll is on a patient, it can lead to emotional stress. Stress is shown to cause disease, but when you are already living with RA this can aggravate symptoms.

Rheumatoid arthritis and emotional stress can come due to the physical changes of RA, surgeries and procedures, financial difficulty, social isolation, strained work and personal relationships, not being able to work, grieving the old you, and coping with a new normal, all while managing the disease.

Stress can also come from situations and events that are not related to health too, so it is important for a person living with RA to find constructive ways to deal with any challenges that may arise.

Coping with a New Normal

There is no cure for RA, but there are ways to manage the disease. Finding a rheumatologist who listens and wants to see you maintain an active vibrant life, getting ample rest, exercise, switching to a healthier diet and lifestyle, along with medication are all common tools recommended to help with decreasing symptoms and progression.

Coping with a new way of living can cause emotional stress. Many people grieve the loss of their old life and the things they were able to do easily. Others are angry that this happened to them, while some ignore by not wanting to deal with it.

While these are all normal feelings, if left unmanaged it can become a bigger problem later on. RA does control aspects of our lives, but we also have the power to control how much it takes away. If there was something you loved doing but can’t do easily anymore, there are creative modifications that can be set in place or an entirely new venture that is similar that you may enjoy.

When we take on too much emotionally and physically, it can lead to burn out which causes stress. Being diagnosed with RA allows you to view life from a different perspective and to start prioritizing what is important to you. By doing this emotional stress can be more controlled, leading to less flares.

Why Does Emotional Stress Cause Flares?

Experiencing both rheumatoid arthritis and emotional stress can worsen symptoms considerably, in a similar way as a common cold or an injury.

Stress is inevitable and will always be a part of daily life. The blessing behind living with rheumatoid arthritis is that patients can often tell what may be causing a flare. It could be something they ate, lack of sleep, being overworked, or having a stressful life event occur.

The bottom line is that stress can be an after effect from anything. When increased pain and inflammation occur in a patient, that is a telltale sign that stress to the mind, body, or spirit is occurring.

Scientifically there is a strong correlation between flares and emotional stress due in part to how closely stress hormones work to drive the inflammatory process. One of the stress hormones, cortisol, is known to cause and raise inflammation markers.

Certain molecules called cytokines can also drive this process. The higher the cytokines are, there is an increased risk of inflammation that can cause flares that range from mild to severe, lasting days, weeks, or months.

This vicious cycle can perpetuate the rise of disease activity and put a patient at risk for developing irreversible joint damage and other complications. Having an action plan on how to manage stress can help keep things at bay in the long-term.

Finding the Silver Lining

What is this teaching me? This is a question I often ask myself. We can't control stressful events, but we can try to control how we react. What we give our time and energy to matters. Something trivial may not matter weeks or years down the road.

The way we react is catalyst to whether we allow our emotions to overstay their welcome or if we allow ourselves to feel it to heal.

When I was diagnosed over a decade ago, I remember the medical staff handing me pamphlets on exercise, diet, and lifestyle changes. Emotional stress wasn't outwardly asked but I was offered social work services as an option. It wasn't mandatory back then as everyone has freewill to decide if they want to talk to someone, but I wish it was.

There tends to be a stigma placed around talking to a therapist that makes people hesitant in seeing one in the first place. At the time I felt very overwhelmed and bombarded with everything thrown at me that the thought of adding in another task made my stress worse.

For me clarity came in the form of daily prayer, meditation, a set routine, and honing-in on spiritual practices. Being open with my struggles through writing and members of the arthritis community, has opened a window of healing too.

Focusing on my own self-healing and self-discovery has led me to find where I still need work. The physical changes from RA have been the hardest to grapple with. Rheumatologists don't have the time to talk about the emotional affects irreversible damage, deformities, and surgery can bring, they can only suggest resources. These are things I wasn't dealing with when I was first diagnosed. At this current time in my journey, talking to someone is something that I feel is needed to further aid in my healing on an emotional level.

However, I have found that when a rheumatologist is willing to be your co-worker and ally, when it comes to your health, emotional stress lessens.

Below I will share some tips that have helped me and hopefully can do the same for you or a loved one in need.

Be Open-minded

Living with RA is tricky, and there is a lot of trial and error. The same goes when dealing with stress. The most

important thing you can do is not be closed off; instead, be open and willing to try or learn new things when it comes to managing emotional stress. If something doesn't work, you can take it and mold it into something entirely new that may work.

Meditation

This may not be everyone's cup of tea for many reasons. Meditation doesn't have to be a religious or spiritual practice if you don't want it to be. It doesn't need to be guided either. It can be as simple as taking a walk outside with no technology, sitting outside in nature, listening to your favorite music, reading a good book, getting creative, and anything that soothes your mind. Even talking to a good friend and spending quality time with positive people who support, uplift and challenge you helps.

Journaling and Affirmations

Writing down how you feel without fear of judgement allows a safe space for your emotions. You can keep a diary of what went well during your day, what could have been better, and a few things that you are grateful for. The Five Minute Journal is a great book to help you get started on this. Seeing the positives in your life can decrease emotional stress by not putting all your focus on the seemingly bad aspects.

Connect with Others

Talking and meeting with people outside your social circle can brighten your horizons and open you up to new ways of coping with stress. Joining a class, club, or attending an event for something that interests you is also helpful.

Exercise

Improving and maintaining mobility with RA is a must. Exercise helps lower stress hormones like cortisol that raises inflammation. You don't need to do an intense session of cardio either, a brisk walk or stretches can help improve stress.

Seeking Counsel

There are many online services available for people who don't feel comfortable going in person. I have known many people who seek help from a therapist with great results. Your rheumatologist or anyone you trust would be great resources for referrals.

Reading

Self-help books tend to have a bad reputation due to the motivation culture that is all over the internet nowadays. Though looking past all that can bring forth the book you may need to improve your life.

Final Notes

The methods and strategies for alleviating the occurrence of rheumatoid arthritis and emotional stress is a personal experience because everyone is different. What works for me may not work well for you and that is okay. It can take time and determination to find those techniques that match your personality and needs.