Maintaining Your Independence

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Maintaining Independence With Rheumatoid Arthritis

Independence is an important and prized part of life. When everything is going smoothly, most people wouldn't give self-care or their degree of mobility a second thought, but that can change quickly with the onset of a chronic illness.

Rheumatoid arthritis is just such a condition, and without the proper response and good, consistent management, RA can threaten your independence – and ultimately, your identity.

Fortunately, you have more control over your illness than you might imagine. Consistency and attention are two important aspects of any successful RA treatment plan; if you can stick with a good self-care strategy and engage with your support network, you can almost certainly improve and maintain your level of independence.

Stay Mobile, Stay Independent

Since RA is an aggressive disease, it calls for an aggressive treatment plan. Disease-modifying drugs are important to slow the progression of joint damage, and painkillers will help you manage the day-to-day discomforts. But juggling RA treatment, symptoms and daily responsibilities can be exhausting, and that fatigue can lead to inactivity. Unfortunately, the less active you are, the less able you become.

Physical therapy, regular movement, and general fitness is integral to an RA treatment plan. Using several different methods, you can keep up your energy, build range of motion, and continue to enjoy a fulfilling routine.

- **Physical therapy.** Your physiotherapist is a critical part of your RA management plan, and you should look to them for guidance and knowledge to keep fit. They will have a thorough knowledge of joint health, and what you can and should do with your body. They can teach you everything from stretches for better range of motion to energy conservation techniques, and will work with you to modify exercises as your health demands.
- **Occupational therapy.** Along with your physical therapist, an occupational therapist can be a life coach, mentor, and medical resource. The primary aims of occupational therapy are to help maintain everyday skills for independent living and to develop and teach patients good coping strategies.
- **Daily exercise.** When fatigue gets the better of you, physical exercise can seem like a ridiculous idea. However, the more often you can perform mild to moderate activity, the more efficient your musculoskeletal system becomes. As you strengthen your muscles, your joints can bear less of the strain, and losing weight can further relieve pressure on painful sites, like the hips, knees and ankles.
- **Proper pacing.** Learning when and how to rest can save a lot of energy and joint discomfort. It's important not to overdo it, but relative resting of the sore joint for 30 minutes or so can help get through a flare-up more quickly and with less intense discomfort. Once your joint pain diminishes, it's important to get back into the swing of things quickly with some moderate exercise.
- **Take an active role in your treatment.** RA symptoms can change, as can side effects, treatment

alternatives, and new advances in medication. It's important to keep up-to-date with your RA medications, and consult your doctor on a regular basis to explore some new options.

Although rehabilitation treatment is central in your RA management plan, don't get hung up on your disability or limitations. It's far more productive to focus on your abilities, and using your strengths to compensate for your weaknesses in creative ways.

Tools and Tricks to Help You Out

You have a personal responsibility to manage your disease, but that doesn't mean you can't make use of the resources around you. In fact, it may be time to reassess your definition of independence, and adjust your attitude toward help and support.

Embrace Interdependence

Many people don't like asking for help or accepting help, especially when an illness begins to interfere with physical abilities. However, it's important to remember that everyone is actually interdependent, rather than independent, because people count on each other every day, for all sorts of help.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with leaning on your support network – in fact, it's a completely natural part of life. Learning to accept help can feel like defeat at first, but the right help at the right time will actually help you stay more energized and in control.

On the other hand, some people can be overly "helpful" with their offers of advice and assistance, and that can be detrimental to your growth, health, and self-care. Take the help that you need graciously, but be sure to assert yourself – and your capabilities – when someone is pushing too hard.

Make Use of Assistive Devices

There are all sorts of tools and devices that can making everyday tasks a whole lot easier, from gripping and grabbing to lifting and reaching. This is one area where your occupational therapist really shines: they will know which sorts of affordable tools will work best in each situation, and may even be able to fashion you a custom-made device to help with your unique mobility issues.

Weight-bearing activities and those that involve resistance are generally the most uncomfortable for the joints, and often the most challenging to manage with RA. Supportive devices that can transfer some of your body weight (like canes, crutches or walkers) and targeted supports for the joints (splints or braces) can help you move more easily, and for longer periods of time.