



Coping and living well

A help sheet for limb reconstruction patients

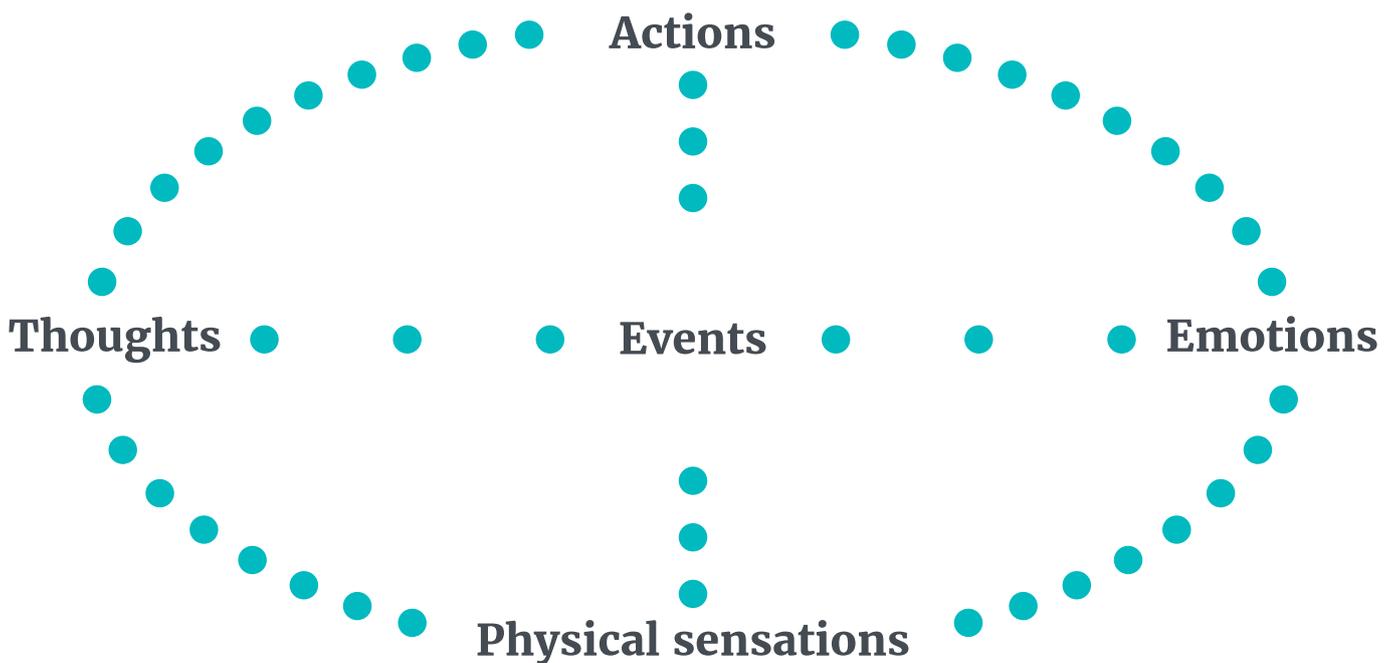
By Dr. Jane Hutton, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Health problems and physical limitations can make us feel unhappy, scared or angry. These strong feelings can be frightening in themselves, but are very normal. They can arise for all sorts of reasons. You may be in pain or experiencing other unpleasant symptoms. You may be worried about how these symptoms will affect your life, or feel that you have lost control over your life or your body. There are many things you can do to take some control back. The aim of this leaflet is to give you some ideas and help you get started.

Coping and living well

Mind and body

The mind and the body are closely linked. Each of the five things in the diagram below can affect all of the other four. For example, pain can make you feel scared or frustrated, and make you think negatively about the future. These effects can work the other way round, too. Thoughts and feelings can affect your body in many ways. For example, your muscles may tense up and your breathing may become faster and less deep. These changes can make pain worse.



The good news is that these changes can be reversed. Later on, we will look at ways of changing your actions and thoughts. First, let's consider changing your physical sensations directly by changing your breathing.

Breathing for relaxation

Place one hand flat on your stomach. Breathe in through your nose and out from your mouth, as slowly, gently, smoothly and deeply as you can. Don't try to force anything. Just let your body breathe. Try doing this for three or four breaths, followed by three or four normal breaths, then three or four more of these slow breaths.

With practice, you should be able to feel your hand moving. Once you have got used to the feeling of breathing in this way, you don't need to use your hand. You can use this exercise whether you are sitting, standing or lying down.

You may also find it helpful to notice any areas of your body where there is tension, such as your shoulders, your jaw or your forehead. Just let go of the tension as much or as little as you can. Even a slight softening can help.

Balanced awareness

Being aware of your body can help you to make wise choices, but over-awareness can mean that you notice normal sensations and changes in your body, which we all experience but are not usually aware of. This can cause unnecessary worry and distress. Because your mood and thoughts affect the way you feel physically, this can make your symptoms feel worse.

Over-awareness also makes it hard to focus on other things. This can mean you miss out on fully enjoying the good things in life.

To help your awareness of your body and the world to become more balanced, try focus on what you can see and hear in the world around you, or try the exercise below.

Taking a breathing space

This is an exercise in pausing and noticing how you are feeling, without focusing too narrowly on one thing.

Close your eyes. Notice whatever sensations you are feeling in your body at this moment. Notice any pain, or discomfort or tension, but also notice how it feels to be where you are... the bed or chair underneath you, perhaps the ground under your feet, your clothes against your body, the air against your skin. Notice also whatever thoughts are passing through your mind. Just notice them come, pass through your mind and go. Notice what emotions you are feeling at the moment.

Now bring your attention to your breathing. Just notice the sensations of your breath, perhaps at your nose and mouth as you breath in and breath out, or perhaps down in your belly as it rises and falls with the steady rhythm of your breath. Do this for about ten breaths. You may be surprised how quickly your mind wanders away from your breath. Each time it does, just gently bring it back to your breathing.

Notice again your physical sensations, the thoughts that are passing through your mind and your emotions. Then open your eyes again.

Taking care of yourself

Think about how you can make looking after yourself a priority. Learn not to take on too much, and practising say 'no' to the things which are not good for you. Take time to do the things which you enjoy doing, and help you to relax your mind and body. Try to balance the things which you need to do, and will give you a sense of achievement, with things you can do for pleasure.

Pacing yourself

It's important to adapt to your limitations but not to give in to them. It can help to slow down and do things at a more relaxed pace, even if this is not what you are used to. Planning ahead can help you do what you need to do more efficiently.

Avoiding problems often leads to them playing on your mind and making you feel worse. Tackling them will help you build your confidence. Remember your strengths and the things you have coped well with in the past.

Doing the things which matter most to you will help you feel more in control and happier. If something seems impossible right now, try breaking it down into smaller steps, and thinking about what help you might need, or how you might do it differently.

Problem-solving

Try making a list of all the things which are troubling you. Pick out one you can do something about and make another list, of everything you could possibly do about it. Pick out the one you would like to try first and write down how you will put it into practice. You might need to break it down into stages.

Try to eat a well-balanced diet and take regular exercise if you can. Both of these can lift your mood, as well as improving your physical well-being. Allow yourself enough time for sleep and rest, but try not to worry if you are not sleeping well. This often happens at times of stress.

Thoughts

The way you think about your situation changes how you feel and what you do about it. Try writing down any thoughts which are on your mind and asking yourself:

Is this thought helping me?

Is there any other way of looking at the situation?

What might I say to a friend who thought the same?

Do I know that's true, or am I making assumptions? Am I assuming the worst?

What's the evidence for and against it being true?

If a particular worry is playing on your mind, it can be helpful to ask yourself *Can I do anything about this situation?* and *Can I do anything about it right now?* If the answer to either question is no, it would be more useful to distract yourself, rather than carrying on worrying.

Trying not to think something doesn't work very well. As an example of this, try not to think of a polar bear. Many people find this has the opposite effect. It's better to notice the worry, and to remind yourself that it is just a thought, and not necessarily true.

Distraction can help. Depending on the circumstances, you might distract yourself by getting up and doing something else, talking to someone about a different subject, or occupying your mind with something else, such as remembering in detail a holiday you particularly enjoyed, or making a list of your top ten favourite films.

If you worry a lot, it can help to sit down with a pen and paper for about twenty minutes a day to focus on your worries and, for the rest of the day, to put them off until that time. The more you practice this, the easier it will get to put them aside until the allotted time. If there is anything you are at all unsure about, do ask. Health professionals are busy, but your appointment is your time to get the information you need.

Talking to the people around you

It can be difficult to talk about your health problems with those close to you. You might be concerned that this will worry or upset them. On the other hand, it may be that they want to help but don't know what to do for the best.

Talking to your health professional

If there is anything you are at all unsure about, do ask. Health professionals are busy, but your appointment is your time to get the information you need.

Before the appointment, it can help to write down questions you would like to ask. In the appointment, it can be useful to make notes, or to take someone with you to help you remember what was said. The more you know about your health problem, the more you can do to deal with it. There may be lots you can do to manage the problem and get on with your life.

Over to you...

In this help sheet, you have read lots of ideas for living well with health problems. Take a few moments now to jot down two or three things which seem particularly relevant to you and how you might put them into practice. You might find it helpful to put this note where you will see it, such as on your fridge or in your wallet.

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