

COPD AND ME

8: Mental health and wellbeing

COPD and my mental wellbeing

Many people with COPD enjoy a good quality of life. The more you understand your condition and are actively involved in managing it, then the better your quality of life will be. Managing your COPD means that you need to **manage your mental wellbeing as well as your physical symptoms**. Some people may experience problematic levels of stress, anxiety and depression. For example, some patients don't want to go out because they feel worried that they will get breathless and start coughing, and that people will stare at them. This type of belief can stop you doing the things in life you enjoy and can stop you from keeping well. It is important that you are able to recognise when you feel stressed, anxious or depressed so that you know you will be in control so that you can manage your own mental wellbeing.

Anxiety and Stress

Stress can be present in our lives when we feel that we cannot meet the demands that are placed on us. Living with COPD can place lots of different types of demands on you. For example, when symptoms feel worse or we feel alone, we might not feel able to cope and then feel anxious. Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried; it can have a disabling effect on your life. Stress and anxiety can negatively affect our body and some common physical symptoms to watch out for are:

- 1) shortness of breath
- 2) tiredness
- 3) sleep problems

- 4) headaches
- 5) muscle tension
- 6) racing heart
- 7) hot and cold flushes

Stress and anxiety also have emotional effects: people can feel

- 1) Fear and worry
- 2) Panic
- 3) Tense and nervous
- 4) Distressed

These physical symptoms and emotions can influence each other. For example, feeling unable to breathe is a frightening experience and for some people may result in a panic attack. When a person is breathless, they worry they aren't getting enough air and this causes anxiety. Anxiety then makes the person breathe harder and faster and this worsens the feelings of breathlessness, resulting in panic. This cycle shows how our thoughts about symptoms can cause emotions, which can cause behaviours that can make it hard to keep well.

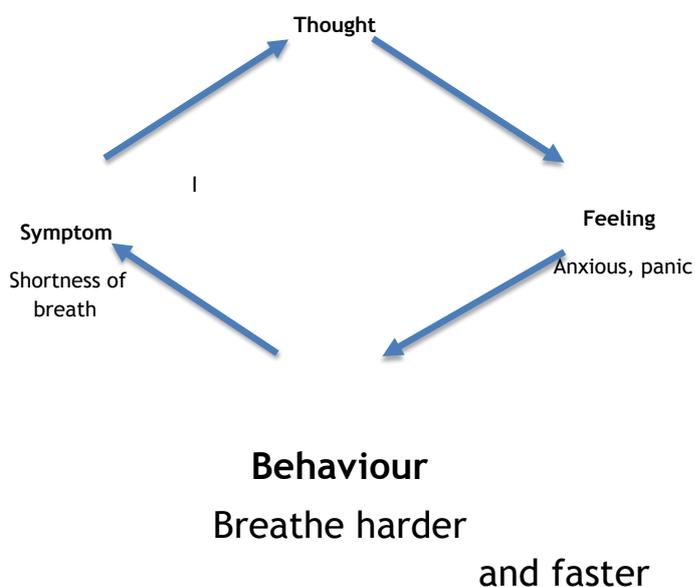


Figure 1. Cycle of thoughts, feelings, behaviours and symptoms.

Depression

COPD has a significant impact on your life and it is normal to feel sad and helpless at times, especially during exacerbations. The ongoing stresses can make you feel depressed. Although we all feel sad at times in life, depression is where the strong emotional effects last for a couple of weeks; common signs include:

- 1) withdrawing from other people
- 2) lack of enjoyment in activities you used to enjoy
- 3) feeling sad and worthless nearly all of the time
- 4) feeling irritable, frustrated and moody nearly all of the time
- 5) feeling guilty and helpless nearly all of the time
- 6) finding it hard to concentrate
- 7) changes in eating (either too much or too little)
- 8) changes in sleeping (either too much or too little)
- 9) decreased interest in sex and intimacy
- 10) increased use of alcohol and cigarettes

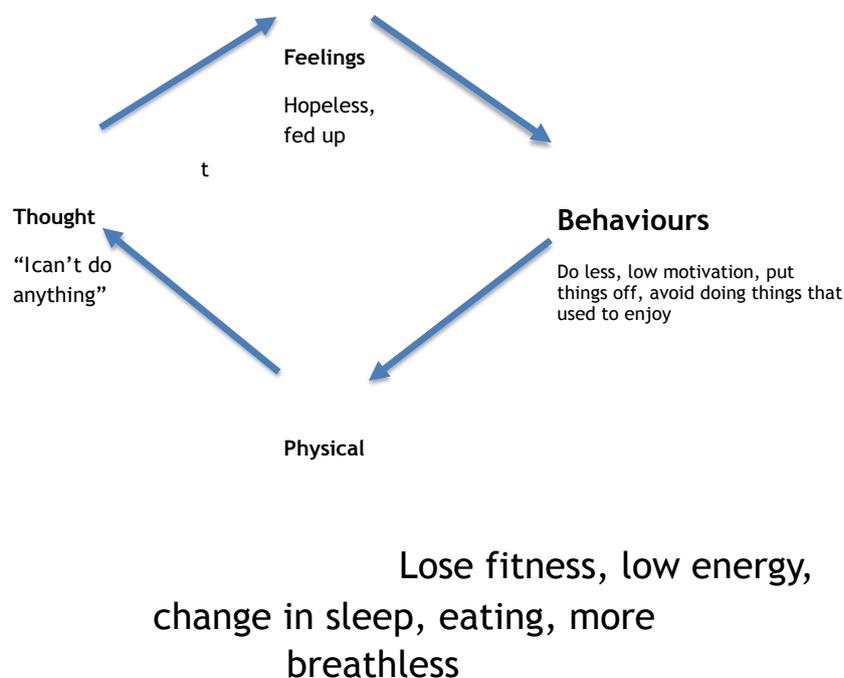
Depression affects how you think and feel about yourself. Our thoughts influence our feelings, which influence our behaviours.

Thinking that you cannot do anything can make you feel hopeless, fed-up and sad. These feelings then make you do less, which means you end up feeling more tired, being more breathless, and having less energy. Feeling more tired and more breathless can make you feel like you can't do anything....and so the cycle starts again.

It is important to understand the connection between thoughts, feelings, behaviours and physical sensations. For example, feeling embarrassed to be with other people might make you withdraw from being with others; but this can make you socially isolated, which reduces your social support, can

impact on your ability to self manage the disease, and can make you feel depressed.

The important thing to remember is that **your thoughts, feelings and behaviours can be changed.**



Managing mood

Managing your mood is as important as managing your physical symptoms of COPD. Untreated depression and anxiety can result in more frequent and longer hospital stays when your symptoms flare up and reduce your quality of life.

Managing your mood helps you keep well, keep active and enjoy life.

There are plenty of effective things we can do to help manage stress, anxiety and depression.

- 1) **Talk to your GP or consultant.** A General Practitioner (GP) is a good first step to discuss your concerns. It can be difficult to discuss your feelings with others, but your GP can:
 - a. make a diagnosis after your check up

- b. discuss available treatments
- c. refer you to a mental health specialist for psychological treatment
- d. provide brief counselling or, in some cases, psychological therapies
- e. prescribe medication

You can plan with your GP about how best you can manage your emotional well-being.

2) **Talk to a mental health professional** such as a clinical psychologist. Psychological therapies not only help with recovery, but can also help prevent a recurrence of stress, anxiety or depression. These therapies help build skills in coping with stressful life circumstances and managing your emotions.

- For example, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is an effective treatment for people with stress, anxiety and depression. It teaches you how to evaluate your thinking and coping about common difficulties and helps you to change these. The cycles of distress can be broken.

3) **Medication** can help manage symptoms of anxiety and depression. Medication in combination with psychological therapies can be very beneficial.

Tips to keep you well

As you are different to other people with COPD, the things that help keep you well will be different to those that keep other people well. Everybody has good and bad days. The following is a list of tips and suggestions that can help maintain your mental wellbeing and keep you well.

1) **Routine:** Having a regular routine helps maintain balance and increases your sense of control. In your routine, you should have a healthy balance of activities you need to do as well as fun activities that you want to do

and can look forward to. Taking part in enjoyable activities can give you a sense of meaning and can help you maintain and enhance your skills and abilities. These don't need to be energetic, expensive or adventurous. Examples might be phoning or visiting a friend, going to the cinema, painting, cooking, doing an evening class, taking a walk every day

2) **Be active:** Physical activity is good for people with COPD. Plan regular activity (e.g., walking, cycling) into your routine to keep your fitness level up. Make a plan for how you can build up your activity level gradually and pace yourself in working towards your goals. Talk with your doctor about the type, frequency and intensity of exercise that is right for you. You may be able to join a Pulmonary Rehabilitation Programme at your local hospital. Getting out of breath during activity is normal. It helps the heart and lungs become healthier and fitter. There are numerous benefits of being physically active. If possible, exercise earlier in the day so as not to disturb your sleep.

3) **Eat and drink well:** Eat healthily and include a wide variety of nutritious foods.

Don't use alcohol or cigarettes to manage stress.

4) **Sleep well:** have a regular bedtime and routine before going to sleep. Frequently not sleeping well can make us feel exhausted, irritable, stressed and depressed.

5) **Be social:** get out regularly to catch up with friends and family. If you cannot get out, ask them to call round or to phone to chat. Get help, support and encouragement from family and friends. Don't be afraid to ask for help from a family member, friend or professional. Accepting help from others strengthens your ability to cope. Get involved in social activities. Consider joining a patient support group. 6) **Be mindful and aware of your automatic and unhelpful thinking.** When you feel stressed or anxious, you may respond to thoughts too quickly. Take some time and

ask yourself if there are other ways in which you can think about a situation. You can break a harmful cycle of thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Think about what you can do to manage the situation to keep you well. When you are getting emotionally upset, you will need to decide what you can do to avoid the situation from becoming worse or how you can reduce the emotional impact of the event.

- 7) **Focus on things you can control.** When you are not doing as well as you would like at a particular behaviour, avoid focusing on the things you cannot control as this can lead to feelings of hopelessness. Instead, focus on what can be changed and change them. This can foster positive feelings of hope and persistence at the task.
- 8) **Relax:** plan time in the day for you to relax. Relaxation can be formal (e.g., deep breathing, muscle relaxation) or informal (watch TV, listen to music, reading)
- 9) **Have goals:** A goal is something that we aim for that gives us a sense of focus and keeps us motivated. It is important that it is personally meaningful to you. It could be something like visiting a friend/neighbour, going to a social event, doing the gardening, or walking to the shops. The goal should be achievable and enjoyable.

Break the big goals into smaller steps. They are easier to complete and it's easier to see your progress. These provide a gradual sense of accomplishment that can motivate you to continue. Pace yourself in achieving the goal: it will take time, you need to go at your pace, and remember you are not competing with others. Expect good and bad days, and after a bad day, it is important try again. Working towards a goal and achieving it helps build confidence and makes us feel better.

- 10) **Write things down.** Keeping a diary or simply writing down a thought can greatly help to cope with problems. Write things down to help show you how you think about your situation. It allows you to organize your

thoughts and to look at the situation as an outsider. You can re- write it, come back to it later or simply throw it away when you're finished.

11) **Knowledge:** learn about your COPD, stress, anxiety and depression.

Being aware of signs and symptoms helps you understand what is happening

12) **Visit GP:** Visit your doctor regularly to review your COPD and mental health.

They can work with you to ensure you stay well and live well.

Remember, your mental health is just as important as your physical health. You can keep well, cope with your COPD and enjoy a good quality of life. Need our help? Call the COPD ADVICELINE 1800 831 2146