

Emotional Health

The physical impairment and on-going pain that results from a repetitive strain injury can often affect emotional well-being. Being unable to carry out tasks and having to adapt your lifestyle can lead to emotional problems which, if not recognised, can exacerbate. You may experience many emotions, including anger, apathy, hopelessness and depression.

Anger

Anger is a normal and healthy emotion, but unchecked it can be a destructive force which holds you back from recovery. A lot of energy is expended on anger, and you may need to decide if this is depleting your resources in other areas of your life.

Anger Management

Make a note of what triggers your anger, as you can then develop strategies to reduce the likelihood of reaching your trigger point. This might include:

- **Relaxation techniques**, including deep breathing and yoga exercises. Once mastered these can be used in any situation
- **Cognitive restructuring** to change the way you think. Replace exaggerated and overly dramatic thoughts with rational ones, eg 'it's awful, everything's ruined' to 'it's frustrating and it's understandable that I'm upset, but getting angry is not going to fix it'. Avoiding words such as 'always' or 'never' also helps, as these words deny that there can ever be a solution. You may also need to assess whether you have a demanding nature which, when demands aren't met, leads to disappointment and subsequent anger. Replace these demands with desires
- **Problem solving**. Focus on how you handle and tackle the problem. Make a plan and check your progress
- **Communication**. Ensure that you are not acting on inaccurate conclusions. Slow down and think carefully about what you want to say and listen carefully to others
- **Change your environment**. Make sure you have some personal time at times of the day that you know will be particularly stressful and consider changing your home or work layout if this is adding to stress levels

There are three main approaches to change the way you respond when placed in a situation that may lead to anger:

1. **Being assertive, rather than aggressive**. To be assertive you need to learn how to make clear what your needs are and state these in a more controlled manner
2. **Suppress your anger and convert or redirect**. Stop thinking about why you are angry and focus on something more positive – this can lead to more constructive behaviour. However, by inhibiting expression, your anger can turn inwards and cause hypertension, high blood pressure or depression. To use this technique effectively it is important to seek professional help.
3. **Calm down**. This requires you to control your internal responses, taking steps to lower your heart rate and let the feelings subside.

Depression

Depression is much more common than is widely thought. 1 in 4 people in the UK experience a mental health problem, which includes depression, at some point in their life (Goldberg, D and Huxley, 1982). People with chronic physical injury and pain can be particularly vulnerable to depression.

Although depression is a natural reaction to the experience of loss and is part of the grieving process, it may hinder your recovery if it becomes a persistent feature of your life. Depression affects different people in different ways. It can produce a broad range of symptoms, which can be emotional or physical. You might:

- feel low-spirited a lot of the time
- have low self-esteem and lack self-confidence
- be preoccupied with negative thoughts
- feel numb, empty and despairing
- blame yourself and feel unnecessarily guilty about things
- find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions
- be unusually irritable or impatient
- wake early, or have problems getting to sleep
- eat more and put on weight, or not eat properly and lose weight
- not enjoy normally pleasurable activities
- experience a loss of sexual drive
- use more tobacco, alcohol or other drugs than usual
- consider, or commit, acts of self-harm or suicide
- have reduced energy and reduced activity
- cut yourself off from others, rather than asking for help or support
- have a bleak, pessimistic view of the future.

A wide range of treatments are available for depression, eg medication, counselling and self-help groups. If you are suffering from symptoms that suggest a depressive illness, you should see your doctor. Be aware that medications prescribed for depressive illnesses are often a short-term solution and the underlying causes must also be addressed. Keep in mind that some doctors may view your depression as the cause of your overuse injury - there is good evidence against this, so try and see another doctor if you encounter this attitude.

Developing A Positive Outlook

Your attitude can have a big impact on your recovery from your overuse injury. Changing established behaviours, attitudes and thinking patterns can help. A pessimistic attitude may reinforce negative aspects and limit your chances of finding new abilities and strengths. Cognitive restructuring techniques (mentioned earlier) can help change unhelpful learned attitudes and responses.

Consider some of the following strategies to maintain a positive outlook:

- Break tasks up into small, achievable steps - be aware that you need to change something to change anything
- Stop yourself using words like “always” and “never” - remind yourself of the exceptions (e.g. Am I “always” in pain? Do things “never” go right for me?)
- Focus on the progress you have already made so as to gain perspective - even though sometimes you may seem to go forward one step and back two steps
- Treat yourself well. Seek out help; try to find a release for your feelings and express your emotions in non-destructive ways
- Keep a daily record of your feelings and activities so you can keep track of what activities help your mood and when you may be more likely to get depressed.

Holistic solutions

For emotional well-being, it is essential to develop an holistic approach. You may need to address some or all of the following:

- If you haven't already obtained an appropriate medical diagnosis, then contact your GP
- Analyse the tasks you carry out at work and/or at home to see if any are exacerbating your RSI and your emotional anxiety. Stop or change the way you are doing these tasks to limit further injury
- If you are having problems at work, find out more about your rights as an employee and present these to your Line Manager, Human Resources, Health and Safety or Diversity/Disability Team – if you do not feel you are being fairly treated, think about going higher up the organisation with your complaint, talking to your union or getting legal advice
- Get help with pain management as this may be influencing your emotional health
- Ensure you have “restorative” rest periods and address any sleeping problems
- Take adequate exercise and eat a healthy diet
- Attend an RSI Support Group meeting – contact the RSI Association for find out if there is a local contact in your area.

Gradually increase your activities as your RSI improves. Some suggestions for this are:

- make time for gentle daily exercise and other self-care options, eg meditation
- pursue a hobby
- explore volunteer opportunities
- study something you've always wanted to learn about
- return to work, or increase the hours you currently work.
