

# Living with Health Problems



Health problems can make us feel unhappy, scared or angry. These strong feelings can be frightening in themselves, but they are very normal. Having a health problem can be distressing for all sorts of reasons. You may be in pain or have 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.

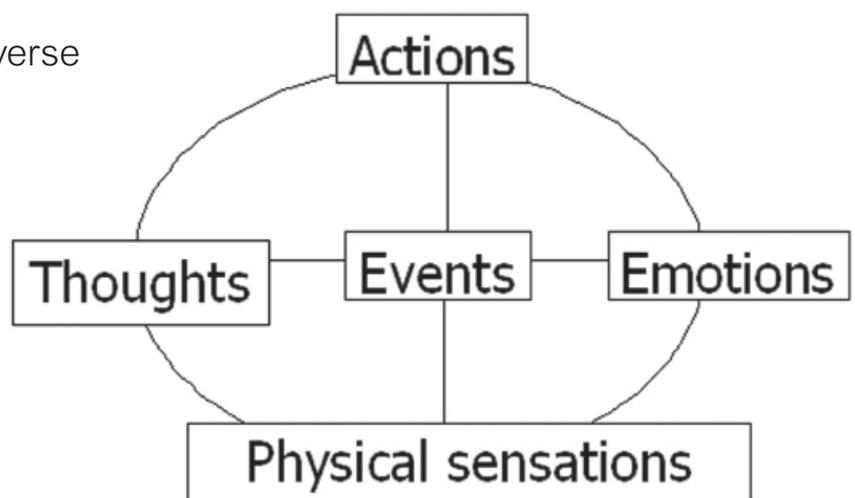
There are many things you can do to take back some control. This leaflet gives you some ideas to help you get started.

## Understanding your mind and body

Your mind and your 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, as well as making you think negatively about the future. This 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 you can reverse these effects by:

- changing the way you breathe
- thinking and doing things differently.



## Breathe to help you relax

- 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. Do not try to force anything – simply 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 are used to the feeling of breathing in this way, you do not need to use your hand.
- You can do this exercise sitting, standing or lying down.
- You may also find it helps to notice any areas of your body which are tense, such as your shoulders, your jaw or your forehead. Just let go of the tension as much or as little as you can. Even slightly relaxing can help.

## Balance your awareness of your body

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

Being too aware 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 you balance your awareness of your body, try to focus on what you can see and hear in the world around you, or try the breathing exercise below.

## Take a breathing space

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

- Close your eyes.
- Notice whatever sensations you are feeling in your body at this moment: any pain, discomfort or tension.
- 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 what thoughts are passing through your mind. Simply notice them come, pass through your mind and go.
- Notice what emotions you are feeling at the moment.
- Now think about your breathing and the sensations you feel in your nose and mouth as you breathe in and out, or in your tummy as it rises and falls as you breathe. Do this for about ten breaths.
- You may be surprised how quickly your mind wanders away from your breathing. 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.

## Take care of yourself

- Think about how you can make looking after yourself more important.
- Learn not to take on too much and practise saying 'no' to the things you do not have time for.
- Take time to do the things you enjoy doing and that help you to relax your mind and body.
- Try to balance the things you need to do – and that give you a sense of achievement – with the things you can do for pleasure.
- 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 how you feel physically.
- Allow yourself enough time for sleep and rest, but try not to worry if you are not sleeping well. This often happens when you are stressed.

## Pace yourself

It is important to get used to your health problems 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 more efficiently.

If you avoid problems, you often end up with 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 that are troubling you.
- Pick out one you can do something about and make another list of everything you could possibly do about it.
- Choose the one you would like to try first and write down how you will do this. You might need to break it down into stages.

## Understand your thoughts

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

- Is this thought helping me?
- Is there any other way of looking at the situation?
- What would I say to a friend who thought the same?
- Do I know that it is true or am I making assumptions? Am I assuming the worst?
- What is the evidence for and against it being true?

If something 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 is more useful to distract yourself and not carry on worrying.

Trying **not** to think something does not work very well. For example, try not to think of a polar bear. Many people find this has the opposite effect and all you can think about is the bear. It is better to notice the worry, and remind yourself that it is just a thought and not necessarily true.

Distracting yourself can help. Depending on the circumstances, you could take your mind off things by getting up and doing something else, talking to someone about a different subject, or thinking about something else, such as remembering in detail a holiday you really enjoyed or making a list of your top ten favourite films.

If you worry a lot, it can help to set aside about 20 minutes a day where you sit down with a pen and paper to focus on your worries. This means you do not have to think about them for the rest of the day. The more you do this, the easier it will get to put your worries aside until the set time.

## Talk to the people around you

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

## Talk to your health professional

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

Before your appointment, you may find it helpful to write down questions you would like to ask. In the appointment, it can be useful to make notes, or you can 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 manage it. There may be lots you can do to control your problem and get on with your life.

## Over to you...

We have given you lots of ideas about how to live well with health problems. Now take a few moments to write down two or three things which are particularly relevant to you and how you can actually do them. You may find it helpful to put this note where you will see it, such as on your fridge or in your wallet or purse.

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**The full range of IMPARTS booklets can be found at:**

[www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/depts/pm/research/imparts/Self-help-materials.aspx](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/ioppn/depts/pm/research/imparts/Self-help-materials.aspx)