



## Living with hep C:



# Managing stress

**People living with a chronic illness often need to make changes to their everyday lives. The hints in this brochure are meant as a guide only. We hope that you find some of the hints or examples useful.**

Living with chronic hepatitis C can mean making adjustments to your life. Health related stress has been linked with physical and psychological illness, affecting all facets of life from work to interpersonal relationships.

Stress is an individual matter; what is stressful for one person may not be for another. A small amount of stress can be a good thing, providing the energy and motivation to work towards a goal, however more can drain your mind, body and spirit.

By changing even one thing in your life, you can more easily meet challenges and manage your situation. You can once again find pleasure in relationships and experience the joy in small things.

### ***How do I know if I am stressed?***

Stress is not simply feeling irritable, moody or anxious all the time. It can also involve panic attacks, loss of concentration and lowered self-esteem.

Physical symptoms can include:

- Diarrhoea, constipation and urinary frequency.
- Abdominal cramps, headaches, backaches.
- Insomnia (sleeplessness).
- Increased heart rate, palpitations.
- Fatigue (feeling drained, run down)

Psychological symptoms can include:

- Inability to deal with demands of work and personal life.
- Lacking motivation.
- Feeling of losing control, overpowered by hepatitis C, as if your world is coming apart.
- Feeling detached from the world, disconnected, alienated or over-sensitive to the reaction of others.

### ***Stress and the immune system***

Stress is associated with changes in the functioning of immune cells. The longer stress remains, the greater the effect on these cells. This means that stress can make you prone to other illnesses like colds and the flu.

Unfortunately, stress can also encourage behaviours which can have a harmful effect on the immune system. This may include less sleep, less exercise, increased smoking or other drug use and potentially unhealthy food choices.

## ***What can I do?***

Once you have identified that you are experiencing stress, there are a number of simple lifestyle changes you can make.

### **Nutrition**

Your body uses up a large amount of nutrients when under stress. This can leave you feeling tired, run down and less able to cope. To combat this, it is important to maintain a balanced diet which includes fresh fruit and vegetables, beans, wholegrain breads and cereals, lean meat, fish and low-fat dairy foods. Where possible, reduce your intake of fats, oils and sugars, as well as caffeine which interferes with absorption of vitamins and minerals. An accredited practitioner may also be able to suggest some specific foods (including some herbs) which enhance liver function (more information is available on the Living with hepatitis factsheet "Complementary therapies: vitamins and herbs").

### **Talk**

Discussing important issues with someone you trust can be helpful. Support groups can also allow you to talk with someone who has been through a similar situation and can offer practical advice. You can also talk to your partner, family or friends, or seek help from a professional counsellor around coping skills. The Hepatitis Council of WA provides telephone support, one-to-one sessions and groups meetings free of charge for people affected by hepatitis. Please call us on (08) 9328 8538 (metro) or 1800 800 070 (country).

### **Let others help you**

Tell family and friends what they can do to help, for example doing some housework or grocery shopping. You can even draw up a roster with family and friends, asking them to help you for just one or two hours a fortnight. Car-pooling with co-workers can also assist in lowering the burden of everyday activities.

### **Sleep and exercise**

Get plenty of sleep and listen to your body. Take regular rest breaks and build in some quiet time each day. Do some regular, gentle exercise such as walking, swimming or yoga.

### **Complementary therapies**

Meditation, Tai Chi, acupuncture and massage are some complementary therapies you might like to try. Please see the Hepatitis Council of WA "Living with hepatitis" factsheets on this topic.



### **Do something you enjoy**

Take time out to be alone in a quiet place to relax. Treat yourself to something you find enjoyable, like reading a book, having a massage, listening to music or soaking in a hot bath. Making regular time to spend with your partner, family and friends doing something you each enjoy is also important in coping with stress.

### **Breathe and relax**

Relaxation can help reduce stress, anxiety, pain and give you energy. It also helps encourage a sense of order and balance, allowing you to make better decisions.

There are many types of relaxation techniques and, in time, you will develop your own. Generally, relaxation involves rhythmic breathing, relaxing your jaw and neck and concentration.

## **Rhythmic breathing**

This exercise will help slow you down and focus your mind. Make sure any tight clothing is loosened, then begin breathing using your stomach, not your chest.

- Sit comfortably and close your eyes.
- Breathe in through your nose (mouth closed) to a count of four. Let your stomach blow up like a balloon.
- Breathe out to a count of four through your mouth, pulling your stomach in towards your spine.

## **Release jaw and neck tension**

Breathe evenly and focus on your jaw. If you feel tension here, part your lips slightly and make sure your teeth don't touch. Let your tongue rest on the floor of your mouth. Let go of the muscles in your throat.

## **Concentration**

To properly relax, you need to clear your mind and remove muscle tension. Concentrate on a word, a thought or an object. For example, place a small object in front of you and look directly at it. Try to keep your attention here and cut off any distracting thoughts or let them pass through.

## ***Relaxing at work***

- Practice short relaxation skills at work. Set aside 10-15 minutes, find a quiet place to sit comfortably and an object to concentrate on.
- Every 60-90 minutes, change your pace. Arrange more rest time in your schedule and take short breaks.
- Eat nutritious food, reduce your intake of coffee and try not to smoke.

- Always eat lunch. Whenever possible, leave your workstation to eat. If working in an air-conditioned environment, try to get outside.
- Check for stress throughout the day. Take a couple of deep breaths and scan your body for tension.
- Slowly stretch your neck and shoulders:
  - Tilt your head gently and slowly from side to side.
  - Slowly roll your shoulders backwards and forwards a couple of times.
  - Recall a pleasant place, memory or experience for a few seconds.
  - Take a deep, slow breath, breathe out slowly. Feel your muscles relax before returning to work.

## ***Affirmation***

Positive thinking is an important tool in stress management. An affirmation is a strong positive statement, replacing any negative mind chatter with positive ideas. Affirmations can change your attitudes and expectations about life. They can be done silently, spoken aloud, written down, sung or chanted. You can even try focusing on an affirmation while walking. Some examples are: "I am relaxed. I have plenty of time to do what I want to do" or "I love myself just as I am".

Phrasing an affirmation:

- Make it in the present tense.
- Phrase it in the most positive way possible.
- Keep it short and simple.
- Put your full mental and emotional energy into your affirmations.

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