



Coping with Illness Therapy Group

Originally created by Thida Thant

<https://www.stthomas.edu/hr/rewardsandrecognition/wellness/>

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Contact Information

Outpatient Psychiatry Clinic Front desk: 303-724-1000

Facilitator:

Holly Gerber, PhD

Group Description

The Coping with Illness therapy group aims to help people better manage and cope with chronic medical illnesses. This 9-week group experience teaches skills such as mindfulness, offers discussions around topics such as coping styles, quality of life, and healthcare, and provides education on coping with the medical, psychological, and social aspects of living with a chronic illness.

Each week we will discuss a new topic, practice a skill, and give practice assignments to discuss as a group the following session. We will also have time for unstructured discussion and check-ins.

This group is for patients who wish to:

- * Explore ways to improve their quality of life
- * Expand their coping style and skills
- * Better understand the effects of chronic medical illness on their emotions and relationships
- * Connect with and receive support from other people with chronic medical illnesses

Commitment: Members must commit to attending 9 weekly group sessions and complete weekly practice assignments.

When: July 12, 2024 through September 5, 2024 on Thursdays from 3:00 pm – 4:30 pm via Zoom

Session 1: Welcome

Session Goals:

- 1) Review expectations of being in the group
- 2) Share your story of chronic medical illness.
- 3) Discuss common physical and emotional symptoms experienced by people with chronic medical illnesses.
- 4) Introduce concepts of acceptance, meaning, and mindfulness.

Methods: We will do an introductory exercise to appreciate the physical and emotional symptoms that are common for people with chronic medical illness. You will also be invited to share your story and why you are in this group. We will talk about ways that people are impacted by living with chronic illness. We will introduce concepts like acceptance, meaning, and mindfulness.

Practice (page 11): Please respond to the prompts regarding how chronic illness has affected your life. Practice mindful breathing exercise throughout the week.

Coping with Illness Group Expectations and Guidelines

- 1) Confidentiality. As a member of this group you, other group members, and the group leaders commit to keeping everything discussed in group private. This means never sharing anything you hear in group and not talking or gossiping about the other members or their experiences, including any names, or other personal or identifying information to anyone outside of the group. You are, however, encouraged to speak with people you feel close to about your own personal experiences in group (e.g. feedback you received, learning points).

- 2) Do not socialize with other group members outside of group sessions during the 9 weeks of group meetings. This means not texting, messaging through social media sites, or meeting up outside of group. This guideline is to ensure that the group experience remains as therapeutic and fair as possible for all members. You may choose to share contact information with fellow members at the end of group at your own discretion.

- 3) Be on time for group meetings. For all 9 weeks, members are expected to attend all sessions, arrive on time, and remain for the entire session unless there is an extenuating circumstance. The group process becomes interrupted and less helpful when members attend irregularly or when people arrive late or leave early too frequently. If you know that you will be missing a group session, please inform the group leaders in advance, if possible, at least one week prior to when you will be absent.

- 4) Complete practice assignments and bring them with you to group meetings. We will discuss the practice assignments as a group. Having your completed will be beneficial to your participation and help you get the most out of group.

- 5) All members need to participate in all group sessions. Since much of the benefit of being in a group comes from participants providing feedback and support to one another, it is important for members to actively participate in the group (i.e., share their problems, feelings, observations and suggestions with others). The degree to which you give and present in this group will impact how much you'll receive and learn from it. The group leaders will help these discussions to take place and move the discussions along, guiding members to offer feedback and support, creating and maintaining a safe and trusting atmosphere, and promoting participation.

6) **Please inform the facilitators if you feel uncomfortable at any point in time**; we are always open to feedback and want this to be a space where everybody feels safe to share. Some strategies to help maintain a safe environment include:

- Respecting the rights of others to express their opinions
- Not screaming, shouting, or using profanity
- Taking turns speaking and not talking over one another
- Turning off other electronic devices that could disrupt the group meetings
- Avoid discussing specific details of trauma or suicide that may be triggering for other group members.

7) Avoid eating or taking medications during group. Medications can have many side effects including sedation and drowsiness that can impact members' abilities to participate in group.

8) Due to insurance policies regarding billing, 1) you must be in the state of Colorado when attending this group, and 2) you cannot have other mental health visits on the same day as this group. If either of these conflicts come up, please let your group facilitators know.

9) Please follow "telehealth etiquette" for this group:

- Remain in one place during the visit (please do not walk around with your phone/computer). If you need to step out, please turn your camera off and turn it back on when you return.
- Set up your device in a private space where family members or others will not be able to hear the group conversations. Use headphones to maintain privacy if needed.
- To help with the quality of video and audio, please mute your device unless you are speaking or plan to speak.

Feel free to speak up. It's different than talking in person, but we want everyone to feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feelings. We might talk at the same time and fumble through it a bit and that's okay.

Issues Related to Having a Chronic Medical Illness

Adapted from Hall, Michelle Flaum, and Scott E. Hall. "When Treatment Becomes Trauma: Defining, Preventing, and Transforming Medical Trauma." *VISTAS Online* (2013).

1. *Depression and anxiety*
2. *Grief*
 - a. Loss of self, independence, role in the family
 - b. Decreased mental/emotional and physical functioning.
 - c. Grief over what you will or may lose in the future (i.e., anticipatory grief)

Secondary Crises

1. *Developmental*
 - a. Can arise when medical illness or treatment interrupts or impacts how we expect life to normally progresses (such as delaying graduating from school, starting a job, having children)
2. *Physical*
 - a. Can arise when medical illness or treatment leaves you with physical limitations that impact how you participate in life (such as climbing stairs, exercising, playing sports)
3. *Existential*
 - a. Can arise when medical illness or treatment causes you to struggle with your identity and what any new limitations or lifestyle changes may say about you. May also make you more aware of your own mortality/lifespan and question the meaning behind your illness or life.
4. *Relational*
 - a. Can arise when medical illness or treatment impacts your relationships by bringing you closer, creating disagreements and arguments, and/or causing you to drift away from people around you. Can also include changes in the way you communicate with people.
5. *Occupational*
 - a. Can arise when medical illness or treatment impacts your ability to work in your usual job or to work at all.
6. *Spiritual*
 - a. Can arise when medical illness or treatment causes you to question your religious faith or spirituality.
7. *Self*
 - a. Can arise when medical illness or treatment requires you to redefine yourself or causes shifts in your self-perception (how you view yourself)

Grief and Acceptance in Chronic Medical Illness

Being diagnosed with a chronic condition is much like losing a beloved family member or friend. You may feel like you have lost your sense of identity, independence, the ability to accomplish future goals, relationships, or your job. You may spend time grieving these losses and feel like there are times where you are able to accept your illness and life changes. Much like grieving a death, there are phases of grief you may move through or between as you cope with your chronic illness. Not everyone will experience every phase of grief or move through them in the same way, though many people will experience some of these reactions.

Denial: Not admitting you have an illness. In this phase, it is common for people to avoid lifestyle changes or medical treatment.

Anger: Anger is a common emotion when we are being blocked from something we want or perceive unfairness, much like an illness may block us from the life we had imagined for ourselves. Anger may be directed at your physicians, yourself, or family members. You may blame the physician who gave you the diagnosis, blame yourself for somehow “causing” your illness, or feel angry towards those who do not have the illness or who do not understand what it is like to have a chronic illness. Anger may be expressed in words, actions, physical sensations, or in silence.

Bargaining: Some people may experience a phase in which they wish to bargain with a higher power or other people to change the situation they are in. You might try to bargain with your physician so you don't have to take medication, or you may pray and try to bargain with God. *“If you take this illness away, I will _____.”*

Depression: As the news of your diagnosis sinks in, you may begin to feel depressed or hopeless. You can lose motivation and notice changes in your sleep, eating and feelings of self-worth.

Acceptance: The phase in which you have come to terms with your illness and have found ways to cope with it effectively. Your general attitude towards your illness is proactive and you have learned that while you cannot control having your illness, you can control what you do about it on a regular basis, such as exercise, medications, mindfulness, or seeking help. This stage is not easy to reach and is not necessarily permanent; you may find your acceptance fluctuates from day to day

Due to the nature of your illness(es), you may find yourself suffering from perpetual grief. This could be due to frequent reminders of your limitations, progression of your illness or additional complications. A significant part of perpetual grief is the fear of disability, pain, recurrence, and death.

Adapted from: <http://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/grief-and-chronic-illness-how-to-find-acceptance-0626145>

<http://amacf.org/mindfulness-stages-of-grief-in-chronic-disease/>

Supplementary Sheet: Acceptance

Life brings joy and pain, and learning the skill of acceptance – to accept things as they are without evaluation or attempts to change them – can bring freedom and help us to become ‘unstuck’. It is about living with painful and negative thoughts and feelings, understanding that they are part of the unhappiness of the life challenges we are facing, and not being overwhelmed by them to the extent that we become trapped and unable to move forward in our lives. You may experience painful and distressing negative emotions due to your medical illness and the pain and disabilities they can cause. When we experience these negative emotions, we often want to “fix” or get rid of the pain.

However, this often is not possible. Instead of “getting rid of” these problems entirely, we may have to face how we deal with these issues and move forward *with them*.

Trying to get rid of your pain through methods such as denial, self-medicating with drugs/alcohol, isolating, shutting down, and escaping leads to more suffering. Your life and your goals may be put on hold and pushed to the side through escape.

Acceptance offers a different approach. This means allowing your internal experiences (e.g., thoughts, feelings, physical sensations) to occur without trying to get rid of them or change them. Creating a non-judgmental relationship to your inner experiences frees you from the struggle of trying to change or get rid of them. Acceptance is an active process of acknowledging and moving forward in an intentional way.

Example: Think of a Chinese finger trap



Your index fingers are inside of a tube. The harder you pull and struggle with the tube, trying to get them out, the tighter it catches around your fingers. You become more entrenched in the trap the harder you fight it. However, pushing your fingers into the trap is what will give you the space you need to move. Stopping the struggle is key to reducing the suffering and becoming un-stuck.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around or within us. It's bringing ourselves back to the present moment when we notice we are thinking about the past or the future.

Mindfulness is a quality that every human being already possesses, it's not something you have to conjure up, you just have to learn how to access it.

Adapted from: <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>

Mindful Breathing Exercise

This exercise can be done standing up or sitting down, and pretty much anywhere at any time. All you have to do is be still and focus on your breath for just one minute.

Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.

Let go of your thoughts for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply let yourself be still for one minute.

Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your senses on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life, and then watch it work its way up and out of your mouth as its energy dissipates into the world.

Session 2: Values

Session Goals: Introduce values and identify personal values in various areas of life

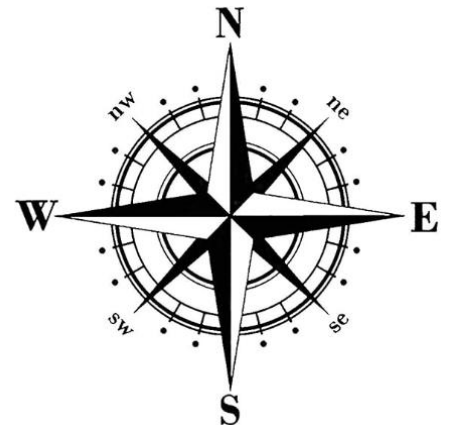
Methods: Review values worksheet and engage in group discussion/activity. Discuss mindfulness in daily activities

Practice (page 18): Values mall exercise, everyday mindfulness

Session 2 - Values Clarification

Values are the beliefs that define what is most important to you personally. Like a compass, they can help guide the direction of your life. Just like you can never arrive at "West", you do not arrive at your value. You cannot check your values off a list. You just keep moving in that direction.

When we honor our values on a regular and consistent basis, life can feel more fulfilling. Values can be about almost anything, from family to hard work to financial success to enjoying free time. For example, someone who values physical health and wellbeing may consistently behave in ways that prioritizes their wellness. This might mean prioritizing sleep, eating a healthy diet, and having time for physical activity. Sometimes people lose sight of their values and may become too focused on controlling the pain and stress of life. For example, someone who values being a reliable friend might stop responding to texts and calls when under stress. Knowing, appreciating, and understanding our values helps us recognize areas of life that might need more time, energy, attention, and priority.



A long-term condition may be a reminder of our mortality and brings up big questions about past, present and future. What do you want to be remembered about? What do you value the most in your life? Your illness could increase clarity over your values and even transform them. Perhaps a change in your financial circumstances stemming from your illness changes your relationship with money and makes money less important. Instead, you might start appreciating spending time with your loved ones more than ever before. Thus, be prepared to lose certain things and gain new ones over the course of an illness.

The goal of this “values clarification” exercise is for you to become more aware of valued areas of your life. Note that there are no “right” values to have, and your values may change over time.



A value is like a lighthouse in the distance. It helps guide you through the storm.

https://josephciarrochi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/act_images_related_to_values_and_commitment.pdf

List of Possible Values

- Acceptance: to be open to and accepting of myself, others, and life.
- Adventure: to be adventurous; to actively seek, create, or explore novel or stimulating experiences.
- Assertiveness: to respectfully stand up for my rights and request what I want.
- Authenticity: to be authentic, genuine, real; to be true to myself.
- Beauty: to appreciate, create, nurture, or cultivate beauty in myself, others, and the environment.
- Caring: to be caring towards myself, others, and the environment.
- Challenge: to keep challenging myself to grow, learn, and improve.
- Compassion: to act with kindness towards those who are suffering.
- Connection: to engage fully in whatever I am doing and be fully present with others.
- Contribution: to contribute, help, assist, or make a positive difference to myself or others.
- Conformity: to be respectful and obedient of rules and obligations.
- Cooperation: to be cooperative and collaborative with others.
- Courage: to be courageous or brave; to persist in the face of fear, threat, or difficulty.
- Creativity: to be creative or innovative.
- Curiosity: to be curious, open-minded, and interested; to explore and discover.
- Encouragement: to encourage and reward behavior that I value in myself or others.
- Equality: to treat others as equal to myself.
- Excitement: to seek, create, and engage in activities that are exciting, stimulating, or thrilling.
- Fairness: to be fair to myself or others.
- Fitness: to maintain or improve my fitness; to look after my physical and mental health and well-being.
- Flexibility: to adjust and adapt readily to changing circumstances.
- Freedom: to live freely; to choose how I live and behave, or help others do likewise.
- Friendliness: to be friendly, companionable, or agreeable towards others.
- Forgiveness: to be forgiving towards myself or others.
- Fun: to be fun-loving; to seek, create, and engage in fun-filled activities.
- Generosity: to be generous, sharing, and giving to myself or others.
- Gratitude: to be grateful for and appreciative of the positive aspects of myself, others, and life.
- Honesty: to be honest, truthful, and sincere with myself and others.
- Humor: to see and appreciate the humorous side of life.
- Humility: to be humble or modest; to let my achievements speak for themselves.
- Industry: to be industrious, hard-working, and dedicated.
- Independence: to be self-supportive and choose my own way of doing things.

- Intimacy: to open up, reveal, and share myself- emotionally or physically in my close personal relationships.
- Justice: to uphold justice and fairness.
- Kindness: to be kind, compassionate, considerate, nurturing, or caring towards myself or others.
- Love: to act lovingly or affectionately towards myself or others.
- Mindfulness: to be conscious of, open to, and curious about my here-and-now experience.
- Order: to be orderly and organized.
- Open-mindedness: to think things through, see things from others' points of view and weigh evidence fairly.
- Patience: to wait calmly for what I want.
- Persistence: to continue resolutely, despite problems or difficulties.
- Pleasure: to create and give pleasure to myself or others.
- Power: to strongly influence or wield authority over others, e.g. taking charge, leading, and organizing.
- Reciprocity: to build relationships in which there is a fair balance of giving and taking.
- Respect: to be respectful towards myself or others; to be polite, considerate and show positive regard.
- Responsibility: to be responsible and accountable for my actions.
- Romance: to be romantic; to display and express love or strong affection.
- Safety: to secure, protect, or ensure safety of myself or others.
- Self-awareness: to be aware of my own thoughts, feelings, and actions.
- Self-care: to look after my health and well-being and get my needs met.
- Self-development: to keep growing, advancing, or improving in knowledge, skills, character or life experience.
- Self-control: to act in accordance with my own ideals.
- Sensuality: to create, explore, and enjoy experiences that stimulate the five senses.
- Sexuality: to explore or express my sexuality.
- Spirituality: to connect with things bigger than myself.
- Skillfulness: to continually practice and improve my skills and apply myself fully when using them.
- Supportiveness: to be supportive, helpful, encouraging, and available to myself or others
- Trust: to be trustworthy; to be loyal, faithful, sincere, and reliable.

Values Exploration

1. Work/Education: refers to your workplace & career, education and knowledge, skills development. (This may include volunteering and other forms of unpaid work). How do you want to be towards your clients, customers, colleagues, employees, fellow workers? What personal qualities do you want to bring to your work? What skills do you want to develop?

2. Relationships: refers to intimacy, closeness, friendship and bonding in your life: it includes relationships with your partner, children, parents, relatives, friends, co-workers, and other social contacts. What sort of relationships do you want to build? How do you want to be in these relationships? What personal qualities do you want to develop?

3. Personal Growth/Health: refers to your ongoing development as a human being. This may include organized religion, personal expressions of spirituality, creativity, developing life skills, meditation, yoga, getting out into nature; exercise, nutrition, and addressing health risk factors like smoking.

4. Leisure: refers to how you play, relax, stimulate, or enjoy yourself; your hobbies or other activities for rest, recreation, fun and creativity.

Mindfulness in Daily Activities

Mindfulness isn't just meditation. It's a state of presence that can be applied to any activity to make it mindful, including eating, walking, and even washing the dishes.

Mindful eating is about fully engaging all our senses to appreciate and savor our food. Instead of eating without pause, we take the time to notice the look, smell, texture, and taste of what we're eating.

Try making one meal a day an exercise in mindful eating. Turn off distractions, put down your fork between bites, and actually taste each morsel.

Physical activity can also be turned into a mindfulness exercise. Whether it's yoga, tai chi, or simply stretching, [mindful moving](#) involves paying attention to the sensations in your body as you move. Feel your feet on the ground, your muscles flex and relax. Movement becomes meditation when you pay attention to every sensation.

Driving: Even mundane activities like driving can become mindfulness practices. Instead of letting your mind wander during your commute, try to stay present. Pay attention to the feeling of the steering wheel in your hands, the sound of the engine, and the view through the windshield. Notice any thoughts or feelings that arise without judgment. Sometimes music helps you to drive more mindfully. [Night Drive](#) by Ministry of Sound is designed to keep you relaxed yet alert behind the wheel.

Walking meditation combines physical activity with mindfulness which is a great way to relax the mind while also stretching and moving the body. Both movement and mindfulness promote relaxation and overall wellness. As you walk, pay attention to the sensation of your feet touching the ground, the movement of your body, and the rhythm of your breath. Walking meditation can be done anywhere, from a park to your living room.

Mindful listening improves communication and strengthens relationships. Next time you're having a conversation, focus entirely on the speaker, ignoring distractions (silencing your phone can help). Before responding, take a moment to ensure you've considered what you will say.

Adapted from <https://www.calm.com/blog/mindfulness-exercises>

Session 2 Practice: \$95 Towards Values Mall

Leisure and Learning Lane		Spirituality Shop	
Traveling	\$8	Prayer and/or Meditation	\$5
Learning new things	\$7	Knowledge/understanding of writings	\$7
Relaxation and meditation	\$5	Practicing a religion	\$9
Enjoying a hobby or sport	\$6	Belonging to a spiritual community	\$5
Enjoying art, music or literature	\$6	Feeling connected to a higher power	\$6
Being creative	\$6	Spending time in nature	\$6
Family and Friends Store		Community Corner	
Helping loves one in need	\$9	Being politically aware and involved	\$8
Hanging out and laughing	\$8	Volunteering to help others	\$6
Emotional intimacy and sharing	\$6	Protecting the environment	\$6
Meeting new people	\$7	Patriotism	\$8
Belonging to a club or group	\$5	Being ethical and fair	\$7
Love Boutique		Mind-Body Connection	
Long-term commitment and fidelity	\$8	Eating healthy foods	\$7
Companionship and shared interests	\$5	Exercising regularly	\$9
Physical intimacy and sex	\$7	Psychological awareness	\$6
Romance and excitement	\$8	Managing stress well	\$7
Emotional connection with partner	\$9	Living as long as possible	\$6
Career-Mart			
Managing a lot of money			\$8
Doing challenging or creative work			\$7
Helping others			\$8
Flexibility and autonomy			\$5
Doing something easy and low stress			\$6

Session 3: Emotions

w/ Problem Solving Supplement

Session Goals:

- 1) Better understand emotions and unique triggers for strong emotions
- 2) Identify how emotions show up in the body
- 3) Learn skills to better regulate and “hear” your emotions.

Methods: We will use experiential activities to better understand and identify our emotions. We will learn about a variety of techniques to “turn down the volume” on strong emotions. We will explore how emotions impact problem solving and some specific steps to improve problem solving.

Practice (page 28): Practice slow down skills and meditation.

Emotions

Painful feelings such as sadness, anger, guilt, regret, or anxiety are a normal part of being human. As much as we may not like having these feelings at times, they serve important functions in our lives, helping us ward off danger and identify what is truly important in life. However, sometimes our emotions can become overwhelming and interfere with our ability to lead the life we want to and deal with life problems. When we are feeling very strong emotions, we may act in ways that we regret later or that are not in line with our values. For example, trying to resolve a problem with a family member with a lot of anger and insults is likely not the most effective strategy and may result in regretful behavior.

When this happens, our emotions may be more in control of our behavior than our rational, logical self. Having emotions is a natural and necessary part of being human. If we didn’t have such feelings, we would have a lot of difficulty living. Having such emotions is nature’s way of saying “*a problem exists.*” We can learn to predict, be aware of, tune into, and “turn down the volume” of our emotions so that we can hear their wisdom without them taking over.

Fight, Flight, Freeze Response

Our brains are set up to quickly sense danger. When the emotional centers of our brain are triggered, a stress response kicks in. Our *minds and bodies* quickly go into a fight, flight, or freeze (FFF) mode.

When we are in a stress response, we may become aggressive (fight), avoidant (flight), or depressed (freeze). Heart rate increases, breathing becomes more rapid, blood flow is diverted from internal organs to large muscle groups as our body reacts to the threat. When we are in FFF mode, the emotional center of the brain is very active and it's difficult to think clearly. In modern times, it is common for the FFF response to be overly active due to stress, anxiety, depression, or trauma. It becomes important to regulate this response to help our body relax and our minds to think clearly.

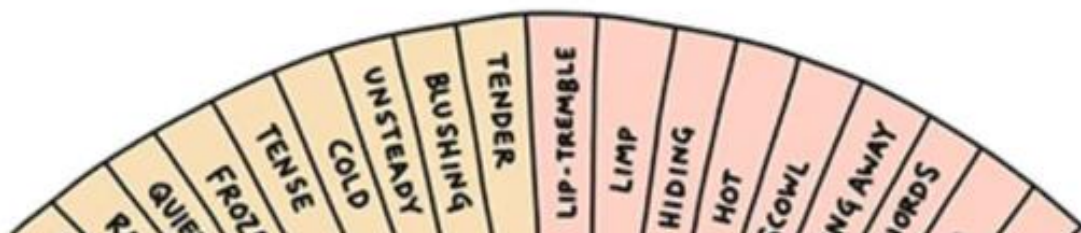
FFF video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwB1PG-Q>

What are your unique triggers for intense emotions? (e.g., external situations, physical sensations, certain thoughts, memories?)

What can I do when my emotions are triggered?

1. **STOP!** Notice the difficult feeling you are having. There may be physical sensations or changes in mood. You may notice a change in your breathing, tears welling up, the urge to yell, or an increased heart rate. You may notice certain thoughts.
 - **Anxiety.** Lump in your throat, churning stomach, trembling, dry mouth, sweating, shortness of breath, feeling weak or tense.
 - **Anger.** Hot or flushed face, clenched fists or jaw, shaking, jerky body movements.
 - **Joy.** Feeling of lightness in your body, warm heart, "butterflies" in your stomach.
 - **Sadness.** Feeling of "heartache," heaviness in your body, tightness in chest, fatigue, drooping face.
 - **Shame.** Hot face, lowered eyes, sunken body posture.
 - **Fear.** Dizziness, weakness in legs, goosebumps, fast breathing and heart rate.

Notice how physical sensations associated with emotions may mimic or exacerbate symptoms of illness, including pain/muscle tension, GI distress, dizziness, chest tightness, and changes in heart rate.



2. **SLOW DOWN...** here a few ways to turn down the volume on those strong emotions.
- Count slowly from 1 to 10 (or 10 down to 1)
 - Take some deep breaths
 - Yawn (Yawning helps the brain relax and research has shown “fake yawning” can have similar effects and lead to spontaneous yawning).
 - Meditation or other relaxation exercises (when time allows)
 - Prayers or Mantras
 - Splash cold water on your face
 - Take a walk
 - Listen to or play music
 - Coloring/painting/drawing
 - Others?



Once you’ve had a chance to slow down, acknowledge there is a problem going on. Consider what your emotion is telling you. Is this a situation that can be improved? If this is a situation we have no control over, then we may need to focus on coping with our emotional reaction. If we can improve the situation, we can use rational problem solving skills.



Problem Solving Supplement

Emotions and problem solving are paired together because our strong emotions can influence how we handle life problems. Life problems can be about a range of issues, whether it's problems with your health, problems at work or in school, problems with other people, legal problems, or financial problems. Encountering problems is a normal part of life, but they can be stressful, complicated, and have real life consequences. Living with a chronic illness may lead you to encounter problems you have never dealt with before or create new barriers to problems you have previously been able to solve.

Lots of things can get in the way of how we deal with these problems, including emotions like anger, sadness, and fear. Experiencing emotions is also a normal part of life! Using the emotion tools above in conjunction with the problem solving skills is likely to aid you in reaching goals and reducing stress.

Rational Problem-Solving

These steps provide a basic framework to handle the everyday stresses of life.

1. Define the problem and set a realistic goal. Make sure you are using facts (not assumptions) to describe the problem. Setting a realistic goal might require you to break down a complex problem into simpler ones.
2. Consider the barriers to your problem. What is making this hard? Practical or emotional problems? The unknown or complex?
3. Generate a variety of solutions to solve the problem. Think of as many solutions as you can before you judge whether they are good or bad. Be creative and specific!
4. Decide which ideas are best.
5. Carry your plan and determine whether it worked or not. Reward yourself for your effort!

Problem/Goal:

I miss spending time with my friends Mara and Jon. They live 30 minutes away. I can no longer drive to meet them due to my epilepsy. I would like to find a way to spend time with them.

Barriers:

Unable to drive myself.

I feel defeated when I think about the independence I have lost from not being able to drive.

Feeling scared to use public transportation in case I have a seizure and some places are not close to public transportation.

I feel guilty when I ask for help.

Alternative solutions:

- 1. Ask my husband to give me a ride to visit my friends.*
- 2. Ask my friend Mara to pick me up.*
- 3. Ask my friend Jon to pick me up.*
- 4. Ask Mara and Jon to come to my house.*
- 5. Take an Uber or Lyft to my friends' house.*
- 6. Have a video call with Mara and Jon.*
- 7. See if Mara and Jon would meet me somewhere so my husband wouldn't have to drive so far.*
- 8. See if there is a medical transport service that can help me.*

Pros and cons:

- 1. I ask my husband to do a lot for me but usually he is willing to help.*
- 2. Taking an uber or Lyft costs more money and I don't know if I can trust the driver to help me if I have a seizure.*
- 3. A video call would work but I'm so housebound I would really like to get out of the house.*

Action Plan:

I will look for a place where we can all meet that is in the middle of our houses so I can get out of the house and my husband won't have to drive as far. I'll ask my husband if he can give me a ride. We can meet somewhere it won't be too expensive, like for coffee or at a park. Reminding myself how important it is to be connected socially will help me let the guilty feelings go.

Problem/Goal:

Barriers:

Alternative solutions:

Pros and cons:

Action Plan:

Body Scan Meditation

From UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center

The body scan can be performed while lying down, sitting, or in other postures.

The steps below are a guided meditation designed to be done while sitting.

Begin by bringing your attention into your body.

You can close your eyes if that's comfortable for you.

You can notice your body seated wherever you're seated, feeling the weight of your body on the chair, on the floor.

Take a few deep breaths.

And as you take a deep breath, bring in more oxygen enlivening the body. And as you exhale, have a sense of relaxing more deeply.

You can notice your feet on the floor, notice the sensations of your feet touching the floor. The weight and pressure, vibration, heat.

You can notice your legs against the chair, pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness.

Notice your back against the chair.

Bring your attention into your stomach area. If your stomach is tense or tight, let it soften. Take a breath.

Notice your hands. Are your hands tense or tight. See if you can allow them to soften.

Notice your arms. Feel any sensation in your arms. Let your shoulders be soft.

Notice your neck and throat. Let them be soft. Relax.

Soften your jaw. Let your face and facial muscles be soft.

Then notice your whole body present. Take one more breath.

Be aware of your whole body as best you can. Take a breath. And then when you're ready, you can open your eyes.

Session 3 Practice: Stop and Slow Down & Body Scan Meditation

1. Practice using the stop and slow down techniques from this session. Record a few notes about what emotions you noticed and the strategies you tried.

2. Practice the body scan meditation using the script above or recording found here: <https://www.mindful.org/a-10-minute-body-scan-practice/>

Supplemental Practice

3. Use the blank problem-solving worksheet on page 26 to work through a stressful problem in your life. Start with something relatively straightforward as you learn the new skill.

Session 4: Unhelpful Thoughts

Session Goals:

- 1) Become more aware of painful or unhelpful thoughts you may have related to your chronic medical condition.
- 2) Discuss different ways to cope with these thoughts through reframing and acceptance.
- 3) Practice using a variety of mental skills to release from unhelpful thoughts.

Methods: We will discuss the concept of the observing self, how this can be helpful when having negative emotions or feelings, and practice guided meditation. We will discuss different ways to deal with unhelpful thoughts, including challenging thoughts and defusing from thoughts.

Practice (page 34): Practice cognitive skills and meditations.



Leaves on a Stream Meditation

Adapted from Harris 2009 (ACT: cognitive defusion exercise)

Sit in a comfortable position and either close your eyes or rest them gently on a fixed spot in the room.

Visualize yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream with leaves floating along the surface of the water. The water is flowing away in front of you. Notice if there is any sound from the running water. Notice if there are any trees on the banks of the stream. Now see leaves floating down the stream away from you. They can be any shape, color or size.

For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf... let it float by. Watch it float away down the stream. Do this with each thought – pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Even if you have joyous or enthusiastic thoughts, place them on a leaf and let them float by.

If your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again.

Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. Don't try to speed it up and rush your thoughts along. You're not trying to rush the leaves along or "get rid" of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace.

If your mind says "This is dumb," "I'm bored," or "I'm not doing this right" place those thoughts on leaves, too, and let them pass.

If a leaf gets stuck, allow it to hang around until it's ready to float by. If the thought comes up again, watch it float by another time.

If a difficult or painful feeling arises, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, "I notice myself having a feeling of boredom/impatience/frustration." Place those thoughts on leaves and allow them float along.

From time to time, your thoughts may hook you and distract you from being fully present in this exercise. This is normal. As soon as you realize that you have become sidetracked, gently bring your attention back to the visualization exercise.

Do this with each thought as you notice it and for as long as you like until you feel better. As you acknowledge each of your thoughts, you do not need to hang onto the. There is no need to become attached to the thought. By watching these thoughts float away, they lose their hold on you and their intensity.

When you are ready, take a few more deep breaths and then open your eyes...

Cognitive Distortions (Unhelpful ways of thinking)

Our minds are very active. They are constantly filled with judgments, ideas, problems, predictions, ruminations, repetitive thoughts, and other commentary. Sometimes our minds may revert to habitual patterns of thought or shortcuts in thinking that can convince us of things that are inaccurate, irrational, or not entirely true. We call these cognitive distortions or unhelpful ways of thinking. Several examples are listed below.

1) Black-and-White Thinking: Also known as all-or-nothing thinking. Thinking in terms of either/or. Something is either right or wrong, all or nothing, good or bad with no acknowledgement of the shades of gray that exist between black and white.

2) Personalization or Blaming: Tending to take things personally. Blaming ourselves for something that wasn't our fault or blaming others for circumstances outside of anyone's control.

3) "Should" statements: Using critical words such as "should," "must," "ought" that lead to feelings of guilt or shame. When applied to other people can lead to frustration, anger or bitterness when they fail to meet unrealistic expectations.

4) Catastrophizing: Expecting the worst possible outcome.

5) Magnifying: Blowing things out of proportion. "Making a mountain out of a molehill"

6) Minimizing: Inappropriately shrinking something (often a positive event) to make it seem less important.

7) Mindreading: Assuming one knows what someone else thinks or feels despite no proof or confirmation that this is true.

8) Fortune telling: Predicting the future and assuming a negative outcome. Pessimism.

9) Overgeneralization: Drawing overly broad conclusions based on a few single events. Often includes words such as "always," "never," "every," or "all."



10) Discounting the positive: Occurs when one ignores all positive information or feedback. Discounting the good things that have happened to ourselves or that we have done.

11) Filtering: Only paying attention to certain types of evidence (negative or positive).

12) Labeling: Assigning labels or names to ourselves or others based off of 1 experience or event.

13) Emotional reasoning: Assuming that because one feels a certain way what one thinks must be true. Mistaking our feelings for reality. (E.g., I feel anxiety so I must be in danger)

14) Always Being 'Right': Treating one's opinions as facts and failing to consider the feelings of others in a debate or discussion.

15) Self-Serving Bias: Attributing all positive events to ourselves while seeing any negative events as outside of our control. Refusing to admit mistakes or flaws.

16) Fallacy of Change: Assuming other people must change their behavior for us to be happy.

17) Fallacy of fairness: Assuming things must be based on fairness and equality when this is often not the case.

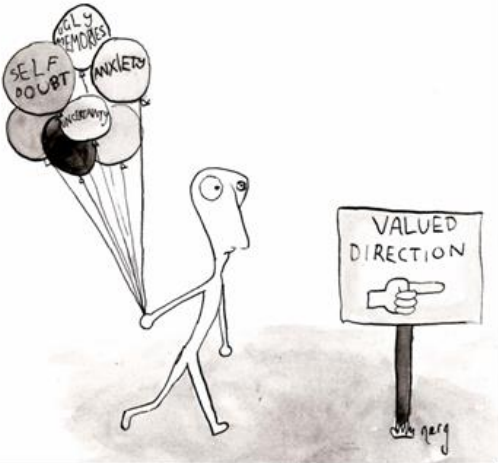
18) Control Fallacy: Internal control - Putting ourselves at fault for things that are truly out of our control. External control – Blaming others for things out of their control or were within our control.

Steps to reframing unhelpful thoughts:

1. Recognize unhelpful thoughts (or cognitive distortions)
2. Reality check/challenging unhelpful thoughts
 - a. Are you ignoring, minimizing or exaggerating a situation? Ask yourself is this opinion or fact?
3. Reframe
 - a. Reframe so your thoughts are no longer as negative, personal, permanent and pervasive
 - b. There are many ways to interpret the same situation
 - c. Goal is to make your thoughts more adaptive
 - i. Find the positives in a negative or challenging situation
 - ii. Focus on what is right rather than just what is wrong

Accept and De-fuse from Unhelpful Thoughts

Another way of looking at these unhelpful thoughts is for what they are – just thoughts! Our minds produce thousands of thoughts every day; that’s just what minds do. Some are helpful, some are mundane, some are painful.



https://josephciarrrochi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/act_images_related_to_values_and_commitment.pdftherapy-a-therapy-based-on-eastern-spiritual-

When we learn to accept the presence of our thoughts non-judgmentally, the content of the thought is not what matters. It doesn't matter if your thought is accurate or true. **What matters is whether your thought is moving your life in the direction you want it to go in.** Whether the thought is helpful to you living a values-consistent life. Can you let your unhelpful be there and engage in your values anyway? When we create distance between ourselves and our thoughts it is called de-fusion.

Cognitive De-fusion Exercises

Just notice it

When you notice you've been hooked by an unhelpful thought, such as "I'm useless," take a step back from it by thinking or saying yourself:

I'm having the thought that I'm useless.

I notice I'm having the thought that I'm useless.

I notice I'm having just another thought about being useless.

Here's that old familiar story about me being useless.

Sing it

Try singing that unhelpful thought to the tune of happy birthday or some other song. You might experience the power of that thought go down dramatically. It doesn't get rid of the thought, but it does change your relationship to it. You are in charge, not your thought.

Say it in a silly voice

Try saying the thought in a goofy voice. Would you be able to take your thought as seriously if it sounded like Donald Duck?

Put it in a movie

Sometime our thoughts come in the form of images instead of words. Allow the image to be there and begin to play with the image as if you are a film editor. Play it forward, play it back word, change the color, flip it upside down. You will likely experience the thought differently.

Write your thoughts down

Recording your thoughts puts you in a better position to be an observer of your thoughts. You might notice whether you have consistent thought patterns that lead to certain emotions or behaviors.

Visualize your thoughts passing by

Like the Leaves on a Stream meditation, you can conjure up imagery to help you let thoughts pass through your awareness without getting hooked. Imagine cars passing by, clouds dissipating in the sky, or bubbles floating and popping.



Session 5: Communication & Chronic Illness

Session Goals:

- 1) Discuss how chronic illness can affect communication and relationships
- 2) Learn strategies to sustain relationships while living with chronic illness
- 3) Learn strategies to improve your assertiveness and set limits with others

Methods: We will review how others respond to illness and investigate our own communication styles. We will review and practice strategies to improve assertiveness.

Practice (page 41): Practice some of the communication skills reviewed here. Start in relatively easy situations. Practice the mountain meditation.



Chronic illness doesn't impact only those who have a condition. It also impacts your relationships and interactions with other people. Managing chronic symptoms can reduce desire, time, and energy to interact, socialize, or have relationships with others. The people in our lives may respond to chronic illnesses in a variety of ways, some helpful and some not so helpful.

Communication even in the best circumstances can be challenging. Trying to explain to others how you are feeling when you have a chronic condition can be extra frustrating. It may seem that no matter how supportive others are, they will never understand what you are going through. As a result, you may find yourself lashing out or withdrawing so you don't have to repeatedly explain your symptoms, thoughts, or feelings.

Living with chronic illness and sustaining relationships becomes a balancing act of maintaining social relationships and setting limits to protect your health and wellbeing.

How others may respond to chronic illness:

- **Caretaking:** Focusing on symptoms, illness, or disability; taking on extra responsibilities.
- **Punishing:** Angry/resentful, nagging, criticizing, questioning, discouraging
- **Middle ground:** Offer encouragement, praise, compliments, being your buddy system.

Improving Communication

- **Be open and honest:** people can only understand what you are thinking and feeling if you tell them. When other's ask how you are doing, try not to hide or exaggerate how you're feeling.
- **Be concise:** Simply saying "I'm having a rough day" or "I need some space" let's others know you need some time for yourself.
- **Be aware of venting.** Complaining at length or too often may affect your relationships. Find a variety of outlets for your emotions.
- **Be a good listener:** Show interest in what your friends or family members are doing by listening, nodding your head, and making eye contact. This can help deepen your relationship with others and be a positive distraction from pain you may be experiencing.
- **Write:** If you are struggling to talk about something, consider writing it down. Write a letter to a family member/friend (even if you never send it) that explains what you need or what you are feeling.

Assertive Communication

When dealing with chronic illness, you may find that time and energy are valuable and finite. Others asking you to meet their needs may require something very valuable of you and learning to protect that can be difficult. You may find that your need for rest conflicts with other people's wishes or expectations. Saying "no" or directly making your needs known while also respecting other people's needs can be challenging for some people.

Reminder: Conflict is a normal and expected part of living. We may not like it, but we can't escape it.

When conflict makes us anxious, we are more likely to avoid it. However, avoiding conflict doesn't make it go away. Avoiding conflict simply moves the problem from an interpersonal one to one you are dealing with alone. You may end up saying yes to things that are not in your best interest. You may feel regret or resentment. You may notice your heart rate increase and your muscles tighten up. You may be more likely to feel exhausted.

Other people may have dispositions or life experiences that lead them to be more aggressive in their communication. Sometimes, aggressiveness is mistaken for assertiveness. Aggressiveness may sometimes get people what they want, but it weakens trust and respect. Others may come to resent aggressive communicators, leading to more conflict or isolation.

Passive	Aggressive	Passive-Aggressive	Assertive
When you prioritize the needs, wants, and feelings of others, even at your own expense.	When you express that only your needs, wants, and feelings matter.	When you appear passive on the surface, but at some point, act out in anger in a subtle, indirect way.	When you stand up for your own needs, wants, and feelings, but also listen to and respect the needs of others.

What style or styles of communication do you tend to use?

Assertiveness key points

- Use "I" or "me" statements, such as "I feel _____ when you do ____."
- Keep a calm, steady voice. Voice tone is an important part of assertive communication.
- Use eye contact without glaring.
- Tell the person what you think without accusing them.
- Acknowledge their perspective.
- Tell them how you feel about a situation or their behavior.
- Tell them how the behavior is affecting your relationship with them.
- Tell them what you would prefer instead.

How to be more assertive

1. Recognize your thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations in a situation.
 - a. *Your son and his friend are watching an action movie at night and the volume is turned up high. You notice your jaw clenching and realize you are getting angry.*

2. Know and trust your feelings are valid.
 - a. *Tell yourself it's valid to be angry. You've been feeling unwell and want some peace and quiet at the end of the day.*
3. Manage your feelings so you can better put them into words (e.g., use a slowdown strategy).
 - a. *You take some deep breaths and have a drink of water to calm down.*
4. Attempt to understand the other perspective.
 - a. *You understand your son and his friend are enjoying the movie and not trying to be malicious by having the volume up high.*
5. Consider the situation.
 - a. *Think about whether you want to communicate in person, over the phone, or via text. Do you want to pull your son aside separately or talk to him and his friend together? You decide to address your son and his friend together.*
6. Communicate the message.
 - a. *I'm glad you are enjoying this movie together but when the volume is turned up this high it makes me tense and frustrated. I need you to either turn it down or use headphones.*

Assertiveness does not guarantee that you will get what you want or that the other person will understand or be happy with what you said. It does improve the chances that your needs will be met, and that respect will be preserved for yourself and in your relationship.

Sources/Resources

- <https://texasneurology.com/assets/library/mayo-clinic-chronic-pain-or-illness-relationships-and-communication.pdf>
- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/chronically-me/201908/chronic-illness-and-assertiveness>
- https://www.mirecc.va.gov/cih-visn2/Documents/Patient_Education_Handouts/Assertive_Communication_Version_3.pdf

Mountain Meditation

Recording: <https://soundcloud.com/devicer23/01-jon-kabat-zinn-mountain>

This meditation is normally done in a sitting position, either on the floor or a chair, and begins by sensing into the support you have from the chair or the cushion, paying attention to the actual sensations of contact.

And when you are ready, allowing your eyes to close, feeling each breath as it comes in and goes out... letting the breath be just as it is, without trying to change it in any way... allowing it to flow easily and naturally, with its own rhythm and pace, knowing you are breathing perfectly well right now, nothing for you to do... Allowing the body to be still.

As you sit here, begin to picture the most impressive or beautiful mountain you have known or seen... letting it gradually come into greater focus... and even if it doesn't come as a visual image, allowing the sense of this mountain and feeling its overall shape, its lofty peak or peaks high in the sky, the large base rooted in the bedrock of the earth's crust, its steep or gently sloping sides... Noticing how massive it is, how solid, how unmoving, how beautiful, whether from a far or up close...(pause)

Perhaps your mountain has snow blanketing its top and trees reaching down to the base, or rugged granite sides... there may be streams and waterfalls cascading down the slopes... there may be one peak or a series of peaks, or with meadows and high lakes...

Observing it, noting its qualities and when you feel ready, seeing if you can bring the mountain into your own body sitting here so that in your mind your body and the mountain become one.

Grounded in the sitting posture, your head becomes the lofty peak, supported by the rest of the body. Your shoulders and arms the sides of the mountain. Your buttocks and legs the solid base, rooted to your cushion or your chair.

With each breath, as you continue sitting, becoming a little more a breathing mountain, alive and vital, yet unwavering in your inner stillness.

As you sit here, becoming aware of the fact that as the sun travels across the sky, the light and shadows and colors are changing virtually moment by moment in the mountain's stillness, and the surface teems with life and activity... streams, melting snow, waterfalls, plants and wildlife.

As the mountain sits, seeing and feeling how night follows day and day follows night. The bright warming sun, followed by the cool night sky studded with stars, and the gradual dawning of a new day...

Through it all, the mountain just sits, experiencing change in each moment, constantly changing, yet always just being itself. It remains still as the seasons flow into one another and as the weather changes moment by moment and day by day, calmness abiding all change...

In **summer**, there is no snow on the mountain except perhaps for the very peaks or in crags shielded from direct sunlight
In the **fall**, the mountain may wear a coat of brilliant fire colors.
In **winter**, a blanket of snow and ice.

In any season, it may find itself at times enshrouded in clouds or fog or pelted by freezing rain.
People may come to see the mountain and comment on how beautiful it is or how it's not a good day to see the mountain, that it's too cloudy or rainy or foggy or dark.

None of this matters to the mountain, which remains at all times its essential self. Clouds may come and clouds may go, tourists may like it or not. The mountain's magnificence and beauty are not changed one bit by whether people see it or not, seen or unseen, in sun or clouds, broiling or frigid, day or night. It just sits, being itself.

At times visited by violent storms, buffeted by snow and rain and winds of unthinkable magnitude.
Through it all, the mountain continues to sit, unmoved by the weather, by what happens on its surface, by the world of appearances... remaining its essential self, through the seasons, the changing weather ...

In the same way, as we sit in meditation, we can learn to experience the mountain, we can embody the same unwavering stillness and groundedness in the face of everything that changes in our own lives, over seconds, over hours, over years.

In our lives and in our meditation practice, we experience constantly the changing nature of mind and body and of the outer world, we have our own periods of light and darkness, activity and inactivity...
By becoming the mountain in our meditation practice, we can link up with its strength and stability and adopt them for our own. We can use its energies to support our energy to encounter each moment with mindfulness and clarity.

It may help us to see that our thoughts and feelings, our preoccupations, our emotional storms and crises, even the things that happen to us are very much like the weather on the mountain. We tend to take it all personally, but the mountain's strongest characteristic is impersonal.

The weather of our own lives is not to be ignored or denied, it is to be encountered, honored, felt, known for what it is, and held in awareness...

When you are ready, take a last deep breath, let it out and open your eyes...

Session 6: Social Support

Session Goals:

- 1) Identify how having a chronic medical illness has impacted social connectedness (or lack thereof).
- 2) Explore the relationship between social isolation and mental and physical health
- 3) Discuss ways to increase and improve social support

Methods: We will identify barriers to having more meaningful social interactions, discuss ways to increase or improve your social connections and go through a guided lovingkindness meditation.

Practice (page 51): Develop a goal related to enhancing social connection and use your problem solving skills to help achieve it. Practice the loving kindness meditation.

Chronic Illness and Loneliness

Chronic illness creates a barrier to opportunities for connection. Symptoms, treatment, pain, and fatigue may cause people with chronic illness to miss out on work, school, and social activities where connections are made and sustained.

How has your social connectedness changed because of your illness?

How we relate to illness can also impact whether we opt-in or opt-out of certain activities.

What if _____ happens while I'm out?!

I'll be too slow, tired, cranky, boring etc...

It's no surprise that chronic illness can lead to self-isolation and loneliness given these circumstances. Socially isolating oneself can mean staying home for days, not talking with family, friends, or acquaintances, and generally avoiding contact with other people. Any form of contact, however limited, is likely to remain superficial and brief, while more meaningful, extended relationships are missing. There are numerous negative outcomes of social isolation, including worse mental and physical health.

The first step is to acknowledge that one is lonely and/or isolated. Sometimes this can be tricky as it feels like chronic illness is the problem, not loneliness. This leads us to think that if we can't fix the illness, we can't improve the loneliness. However, if we change the problem to loneliness and think of chronic illness as a barrier (albeit a major one!) then we can begin to find ways to improve our life.

Improve both quantity and quality of interactions

How many people do you interact with in a day? Think about mail carriers/delivery drivers, cashiers, receptionists. A smile and a thank you count as interaction. Can you increase these micro-moment interactions? What about online interactions?

The importance of quality social support

A strong social support network is crucial to coping with the stresses of chronic illness. Friends and family members can offer compassion, acceptance, assistance and a place to share your concerns and needs. They can make you feel important and needed by allowing you to offer them comfort and companionship, too. Social support provides a sense of belonging, security and comfort.

A good support system also has health benefits. People who have good friends and supportive family members generally:

- Cope better with chronic pain and other symptoms.
- Are less likely to become depressed.
- Are more active and independent.
- Have stronger immune systems and recover faster from illness.
- Have lower blood pressure and cholesterol.
- Live longer.

Develop and nurture a support system

- Appreciate your friends and family. Let them know with your words and actions.
- Stay in touch – attend gatherings, answer phone calls, respond to texts, emails, etc. Accept invitations.
- Take Charge – Don't wait for someone else to make the first move.
- Be a good listener & practice the other good communication skills we covered. Tell your friends and family what you need.
- Explore opportunities in the community – consider volunteer or neighborhood events, clubs, hobbies or classes. More ideas on this below!
- Don't give up on existing relationships – relationships can be hard! They require patience, acceptance, and compromise.
- Practice knowing your limits and boundaries. Say yes when you can and no when you need to.

Setting Limits in Relationships

- **Avoid harmful relationships.** You may need to evaluate your relationships and determine whether it is supporting your well-being or not. Behaviors like excessive alcohol use, smoking, or constant negativity will likely add to your stress and risk your health. Give yourself permission to limit contact or cut ties with those who do not support your wellbeing.
- **Manage necessary interactions.** Sometimes we can't completely cut ties with stressful people in our lives, whether it's a co-worker or family member. Consider ways to manage or limit the relationship instead.
- **Avoid a sense of duty.** Relationships that have strings attached or require you to conform to a certain lifestyle may not be in your best interest.
- **Pick the right supporter.** If you need help, consider who is the best person to ask. Chose people who understand and support your use of setting boundaries and other skills. For example, calling your mother when you symptoms flare may not be helpful if she tends to dwell on your condition.

"How can I help?"

Supportive friends and family members might ask this. How do you respond?

- *learn about my condition*
- *don't always talk about my condition*
- *don't hover over me*
- *be patient*
- *join me in activities*
- *just listen sometimes*
- *don't give up on your activities*
- *take care of yourself*
- *Others? _____*

Activity Ideas: Engaging in activities creates opportunity for social interaction.

Volunteering

Cultural activities (museums, theater, movie theaters, art galleries, live music)

Reading books/book club

Spending time on hobbies (music, singing, crafts)

Internet/computer (especially videoconferencing, computer classes, interactive games)

Sports

Gardening (indoor or outdoor)

Holiday events

Card/board games or video games

Shopping

Cooking/dining

Support Groups

Pets

Sources

- <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/chronically-me/202202/the-link-between-chronic-illness-and-loneliness>
- <https://texasneurology.com/assets/library/mayo-clinic-chronic-pain-or-illness-relationships-and-communication.pdf>

Session 6 Resource Sheet: Ways to Improve Social Connection

1. Meet up Groups

<https://www.meetup.com/>

- a. Find a group that fits your interests
- b. Or make your own!
- c. Has both a website and phone app version

2. The Happiness Project

a. <http://gretchenrubin.com/get-started/get-started/>

i. Taken from the website: "One of the happiness-project resolutions that I've found to be most effective – and also the most fun – is to join or start a group. Being part of a group is a terrific way to make new friends, deepen existing friendships, have fun, create a sense of belonging, and spend time thinking about a subject that interests you. People all over the world have started groups for people doing happiness projects together. These groups swap ideas, build enthusiasm, give encouragement, and – perhaps most important – hold each other accountable (Think AA and Weight Watchers). People all over the world have started Better Than Before habits groups and Happiness Project groups together. These groups swap ideas, build enthusiasm, give encouragement, and

b. <http://gretchenrubin.com/habits/start-a-habits-group/>

ii. Taken from the website: "If you'd like help launching a group for people doing a Better Than Before habits groups together, email me at grubin@gretchenrubin.com to get a copy of the habits starter kit. Keep me posted about your group! I'm wildly interested to hear what everyone's doing. Email me at grubin@gretchenrubin.com"

3. Local Centers and Clubs

Learn about what facilities and opportunities already exist (e.g., through a day center or a lunch club). It doesn't matter whether you initially get anything out of a social interaction – it may take some time and persistence. Ultimately, you may meet someone you like or someone who shares your ideas and interests, but this will happen only if you keep going to places offering you social opportunities.

Examples include:

- a. Denver and Aurora Recreation Centers (www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/denver-parks-and-recreation & www.aurora.gov.org/things_to_do/recreation)
- b. Denver Free Days: <http://www.wkre.com/blog/2018/02/2018-colorado-free-days/>
- c. Free Yoga Classes: <http://www.unlimitedyoga.com/#welcome-1>
- d. Washington Street Community Center: (303) 733-4643
- e. CHARG Drop-in Center: <https://www.charg.org/services/drop-in/>
- f. Groups for new moms

4. Get a pet and go to pet groups or dog parks, etc. to meet other pet owners. Or borrow a friend's dog to take for a walk or to the dog park.

**Another option is to download a dog walking app (“Rover” or “Wag” are two examples) and get paid to walk dogs when you’re feeling up for it.

5. Offer your support

One way that housebound people can feel useful is through offering telephone support to others who are isolated. Another useful activity is letter writing, perhaps for a worthy cause (such as Amnesty International or for a political cause) or corresponding with a pen pal.

6. Free Classes

<https://www.mooc-list.com/>

- a. Massive Online Open Courses
- b. Free online classes offered by universities around the world
- c. Can see if some courses have options for online discussion forums

7. Share your story

<https://themighty.com/submit-a-story/>

“The Mighty is asking the following: Were you diagnosed with your disease, disability and/or mental illness as an adult? Tell us about the moment you finally got your diagnosis. If you’d like to participate, please send a blog post to community@themighty.com. Please include a photo for the piece, a photo of yourself and 1-2 sentence bio. Check out our Submit a Story page for more about our submission guidelines.”

Loving Kindness Meditation

Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) is a mindfulness-based meditation that helps us cultivate compassion, kindness, acceptance and love, for ourselves and all others.

Begin by getting yourself comfortable. Allow yourself to switch from your usual mode of doing, to simply being. Connect with your body and bring your attention to your breathing. Notice how your body accommodates each breath. Settle in.

Turn your focus to the heart. Feel or imagine your beating heart with gratitude and warmth.

Call to mind a person (or pet) of past or present whose steady love and unconditional acceptance of you touches your heart in a special way. Allow yourself to experience their lovingkindness as if they were right near you, happy for your presence and grateful for you just as you are. Notice how this image eases your body and your mind.

Relax into this warm feeling of connection. Keep it simple. Allow thoughts to arise and evaporate and come back to the heart. Take your time.

Now put this lovingkindness and warmth that you are receiving into words. If helpful, you can imagine that these kind thoughts are what the person or animal you've called to mind wants for you and picture that they are wishing them with you. Adapt the words so they reflect your personal wishes and situation. Here's one example:

May I be safe

May I be happy and at peace

May I be well in body and mind

Repeat the wishes at least three times, out loud or in your mind. Savor them. Take your time. Feel their ability to warm and open the heart.

Next, bring to mind someone who means a lot to you, someone in whose presence you can relax and be fully appreciated for who you are. Feel the goodness of this heart connection, feel your mutual gratitude. As you offer your well-wishes, imagine that the person is touched by them and experiences happiness and peace.

May you be safe

May you be happy and at peace
May you be well in body and mind

Repeat the wishes at least three times, out loud or in your mind. Appreciate the sincerity of the words. Feel their ability to warm and open the heart. Take your time.

Next, bring to mind someone you've met casually, someone you recognize but don't really know. A school crossing guard, the person who manages the produce department at your grocery store, a neighbor you nod to. As you think of them, wish them well. Repeat the same words and imagine that they receive the full benefit of them. Gone, their aches and pains, material worries, concerns about the future. Imagine that as your wishes touch them, their hearts and minds are at ease.

May you be safe
May you be happy and at peace
May you be well in body and mind

(The next step is traditional, but if it's too difficult for you, you can skip it.)

Now imagine someone you don't care for. It could be someone you know personally or someone you know of and who triggers your antipathy. You may think of this person as unworthy of your kind consideration. As you evoke them in your mind's eye, try to let go of your antipathy. It may help to imagine them as they were when they were a young, vulnerable child, before things became so difficult. Can you include them in your well-wishes?

May you be safe
May you be happy and at peace
May you be well in body and mind

Repeat the wishes at least three times. Appreciate the words. Feel their ability to warm and open your heart. Take your time.

Finally, include as many people and animals as you can in your wishes. Happy or sad, loved or neglected, in good health or in poor health, in all stages of life. Without making a particular

effort to envision them separately, simply maintain awareness of the presence of all of these beings who share your planet and send them your wishes with a sincere and tender heart.

May you be safe

May you be happy and at peace

May you be well in body and mind

Repeat the wishes at least three times. Appreciate the words. Feel their ability to warm and open the heart. Imagine that your practice brings about deep healing for yourself and others. Take your time.

Now return to awareness of being present in your space, connected to all of these beings through your wishes. Maintaining this sense of presence to your best ability, simply sit.

Recording: https://soundcloud.com/jack-kornfield/loving-kindness-meditation?utm_source=clipboard&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fjack-kornfield%252Floving-kindness-meditation

Session 6 Practice:

1. Develop a goal related to enhancing social connections. It could be big or small, related to nurturing existing relationships or developing new ones. Work through steps below related to your goal. Make some notes about how it went.

One thing I can do to improve my social connection:

Is there anything that could get in the way or make this hard? If so, how can I get around that?

What happened when I acted toward my goal? What emotions did I experience? Did something come up that was unexpected?

2. Practice the loving kindness meditation and/or other mindfulness activities.

- Recording: https://soundcloud.com/jack-kornfield/loving-kindness-meditation?utm_source=clipboard&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fjack-kornfield%252Floving-kindness-meditation

Session 7: Trauma, Resilience, & Gratitude

Session Goals:

- 1) Better understand the potentially traumatizing effects of medical illness/treatment
- 2) Better understand resilience and identify it within yourself.
- 3) Practice gratitude exercises

Methods: We will review education about medical illness/treatment and trauma. We will discuss resilience and practice activities to cultivate gratitude.

Practice (page 58): Practice gratitude meditation and reflection exercises.

What is medical trauma?

Adapted from International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Public Fact Sheet, Dr. Sacha McBain

- Medical trauma is an emotional and physical responses to pain, injury, serious illness, medical procedures, and frightening treatment experiences.
- There are many different experiences related to illness, injury or medical treatment that can be difficult, uncomfortable, or frightening.
 - A sudden, life-threatening illness or injury and the related treatment
 - Shock and feeling out of control when receiving a scary diagnosis
 - Life changing complications or problems during or after a medical procedure
 - Unexpected medical intervention such as needing an emergency intervention
 - Things about the hospital like constant noise, frequent medical checks, and staff disrupting sleep
 - Seeing frightening images or having frightening thoughts due to delirium while in the hospital
 - *Delirium is when you become confused, cannot think clearly and are not aware of your surroundings. It happens suddenly and can last for hours or days. It can be caused by medication, infection, lack of sleep or another medical reason.*

What are the signs I'm having a response to a medical trauma?

- After a medical trauma, you may have a trauma response. This is how you react to the event.
- Many people experience a trauma response right after the trauma and feel better over time. They may also experience grief. Each person has their own response.
- Some people experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a mental health problem that causes anxiety or stress after a traumatic event.
- **Signs of PTSD include:**
 - **You keep going over the details of the trauma in your head.** Memories of the event can come back at any time. Something you see, hear, smell, touch or taste may cause you to feel the same feelings you did when the event happened.
 - **Avoid things, places and people that remind you of the event.** You may not want to go back to the hospital, see your doctor again or take medications. When you avoid uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, it can make your symptoms worse.
 - **Have changes in the way you think and feel.** The way you think about yourself and others may change because of the trauma. It may be hard to trust medical providers.
 - **Feel very nervous.** You may feel "on edge," have a hard time falling asleep or trouble relaxing.

How to cope with medical trauma

- **Talk about what happened.** To take care of a physical wound, you might be asked to change bandages or take medications. Some of this physical healing can be uncomfortable, but it helps you heal over time. This is also true for emotional healing. Talking, thinking about, and feeling your emotions about the event can be painful, but it is an important step to healing. Sharing your feelings with someone you feel supported by can help relieve them.
- **Use deep breathing and other mindfulness skills, such as the ones we've been practicing in this group.** This can help you get out of the fight, flight, freeze response that trauma and stress can trigger.

“Resilience is accepting your new reality,

even if it's less good than the one you had before.”

Elizabeth Edwards

“The human capacity for burden is like bamboo – far more flexible than you’d ever believe at first glance.”

Jodi Picoult



*“The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling,
but in rising every time we fall.”*

Nelson Mandela

“The bamboo that bends is stronger than the oak that resists.”

Japanese Proverb

Resilience

What is resilience?

Resilience is defined as an ability to flexibly adapt to challenging, adverse, or traumatic life events. It can also be described as “bouncing back” from difficult experiences. Resilience is not a trait that you either have or do not have; it is a set of strategies that can be learned and practiced.

What is it not?

Resilience is not being devoid of negative emotions or not experiencing any difficulty. Exposure to difficulty in life is inevitable. Sadness and emotional pain are normal, healthy responses to adversity or trauma.

What does resilience involve?

It involves behaviors, thoughts and actions that can be learned or developed in anyone. Factors involved in resilience include supportive relationships, the ability to make realistic plans and goals and take steps to carry them out, a positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities, good communication and problem-solving skills, and the capacity to manage strong feelings and urges.



New growth after forest fire

What are ways to build resilience?

- 1) Make connections. Research shows that resilience is fostered by social systems that offer support during challenging times. Friends, family, social circles, community groups, and support groups like this one may help you develop resilience.
- 2) Accept that change is a part of living: Certain goals may no longer be attainable because of adverse situations. You may have to accept new limitations.
- 3) Focus on your strengths and what you can do. You can't change the fact that highly stressful events happen, but you can change how you interpret and respond to these events. Develop confidence in your ability to solve problems and try visualizing what you want, rather than worrying about what you fear. Ask yourself, "What's one thing I know I can accomplish today that helps me move in the direction I want to go?"
- 4) Self-reflection and expression: People often learn something about themselves and may find that they have grown in some respect because of their struggle (e.g., increased appreciation for life). Journaling can be an invaluable tool to increase self-awareness and foster uncensored self-expression. Self-expression through body movement (e.g., yoga, dance), visual arts, poetry, music etc. can also be a constructive way to process and learn from your experience.
- 5) Physical Wellness: Resilience can be fostered not only by internal aspects, but also external factors and behaviors. Adhering to a diet that fulfills your nutritional needs, getting adequate sleep, and engaging in appropriate physical activity will help your body adapt to stress and help ward off added emotional distress.
- 7) Practice Gratitude: Regularly practicing gratitude can re-wire your brain to become more positive and resilient.

Gratitude Activity: Gift Giving

- You will need a blank piece of paper and a drawing utensil
- We will divide into pairs. Each person will sketch an object that they think their partner may like to receive. After we have finished drawing, we will exchange gifts.

Adapted from: <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience.aspx>.

<https://livingwellbee.com/build-resilience-chronic-disease/?cn-reloaded=1&cn-reloaded=1>

<https://drarielleschwartz.com/resilience-informed-therapy/>

<https://www.operationprevention.com/sites/default/files/docs/DEA-Op-Prevention-GMB-Activity-Gratitude.pdf>

Gratitude Meditation

Take some time to place yourself in a comfortable position. Take a few deep breaths and let your chest rise and fall with each inhalation and exhalation. When you are ready, let your eyes drift closed.

Take a long slow, deep breath in and slowly exhale.

Feel any tension melting away as you gradually relax deeper with each breath.

Take another long slow, deep breath in and exhale.

Feel yourself drifting into a state of deep relaxation

Continue to breathe slowly and gently as you bring your awareness to the top of your head.

Picture a warm, loving golden light spreading from the top of your head down to your toes.

Feel your muscles relax as the light washes over you, surrounding and protecting you.

Take a few more deep breaths and relax deeply.

In this safe, relaxed state reflect on all the things you're grateful for. As each gratitude appears, visualize yourself saying the words *thank you* or *for this I am grateful* to each.

Let your awareness move to your immediate environment: scan your body for the clothes and jewelry you are wearing, the place you are sitting, your shelter, your devices. *Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful."*

Next, bring to mind those people in your life to whom you are close: your friends, family, a partner, pets.... *Say to yourself, "For this, I am grateful."* You may also bring to mind people with whom you are not close but who are important to you: The farmworkers who are planting and harvesting our food, delivery drivers, health care providers, teachers of the next generation, artists enriching our lives. *Say to yourself, "For this, I am grateful."*

Next, turn your attention onto yourself: you are a unique individual, blessed with imagination, talents, the ability to communicate, to learn from the past and plan for the future, you may consider your heartbeat, breath in your lungs, or your senses. *Say to yourself: "For this, I am grateful."*

Now, allow the feeling of deep gratitude to come into your body.

Notice where in your body the feeling is.

Take a few deep breaths and allow this feeling to expand.

With each inhale, let this feeling grow outwards. Expanding to fill your chest, your arms and hands, your legs and feet. With each inhale this feeling grows, filling you up.

Enjoy the pleasant feeling gratitude gives you and feel it washing away your tension and negativity.

Now, wiggle your toes and fingers, open your eyes and give yourself a few moments to adjust.

Practice Sheet: Session 7

1. Complete the exercise below. It will have a greater impact if you do it each day either in writing or in your own mind.

Building resilience and gratitude

List the 3 best things about today:

List 3 things you like about yourself:

Describe a challenge you have overcome:

One positive thing I can do tomorrow:

2. Practice gratitude meditation and/or other mindfulness practices.

A 10-Minute Gratitude Practice to Notice, Shift, and Rewire

- <https://www.mindful.org/a-10-minute-gratitude-practice-to-notice-shift-and-rewire-your-brain/>

A 12-Minute Meditation to Cultivate Gratitude for Small Things

- <https://www.mindful.org/a-12-minute-meditation-to-cultivate-gratitude-for-small-things/>

Gratitude Practice: Savor the Moment by Tapping into Your Senses

- <https://www.mindful.org/5-minute-gratitude-practice-focus-good-tapping-senses/>

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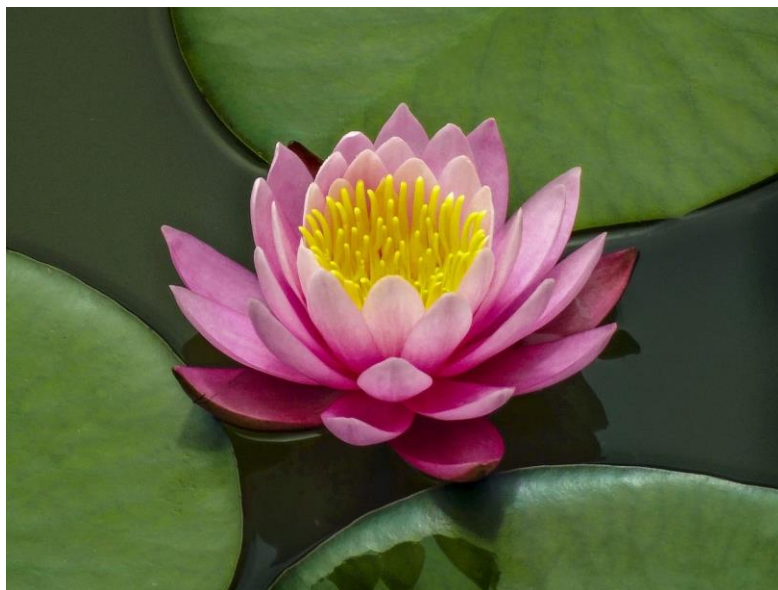
Session 8: Meaning-Centered Living

Session Goals:

- 1) Discuss meaning
- 2) Discuss how to find meaning when living with chronic illness

Methods: Reviewing values clarification worksheet and discuss concepts and sources of meaning.

Practice (page 64): Review the values clarification and values mall exercise from session 2. Have any of your thoughts or beliefs regarding your values changed since the beginning of group? How do you feel now compared to then regarding your ability to pursue or re-discover these values?



Meaning-Centered Living

Adapted from Breitbart, William and Poppito, Shannon. "Meaning-Centered Group Psychotherapy: A Treatment Manual." 2014.

"He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how"

- Nietzsche

"But if there is meaning, it is unconditional meaning, and neither suffering nor dying can detract from it. "

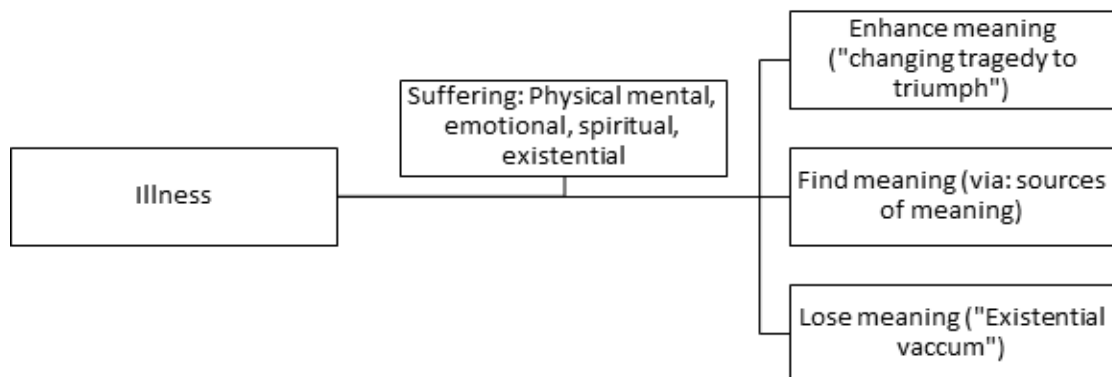
- Viktor Frankl

"Even the tragic and negative aspects of life, such as unavoidable suffering, can be turned into a human achievement by the attitude which a [person] adopts toward [their] predicament... transforming despair into triumph"

- Viktor Frankl

"Life gives us many things. Some appear to be wonderful, and some appear to be tragic. What is most important is to utilize our freedom to choose how we respond to what life gives us."

- William Breitbart



Some definitions of meaning:

1. Implied or explicit significance
2. Important or worthwhile quality; purpose
3. Having a sense that one's life has meaning involves the conviction that one is fulfilling a unique role and purpose in a life that is a gift.
4. Meaningfulness refers to moments when you feel most alive, connected to existence. Things from the past that, whether tragic or joyful, awesome or dreadful, when you look back on them, you find to be very life affirming and profound.

Basic Concepts of Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy:

1. The Will to Meaning: The need to find meaning in human existence is a basic primary motivating force shaping human behavior.
2. Life has Meaning: The possibility to create or experience meaning exists throughout our lives, even up to the last moments of life. If we feel life is meaningless, it is not because there is no meaning to our lives, it is because we have become disconnected from meaning.
3. Freedom of Will: We have the freedom to find meaning in our existence and to choose our attitude toward suffering and limitations.

Sources of Meaning:

- **Historical Sources** - *"Life as a Legacy"*
 - Legacy that's been given (past)
 - Legacy one lives (present)
 - Legacy one will give (future)
- **Attitudinal Sources** - *"Encountering Life's Limitations"*
 - Turning personal tragedy into triumph via the attitude taken toward given circumstances (e.g., physical suffering, personal adversity, one's mortality)
- **Creative Sources** - *"Actively Engaging in Life"*
 - Via: roles, work, deeds, accomplishments
 - Re: Courage, commitment, and responsibility
- **Experimental Sources** - *"Connecting with Life"*
 - Via: Relationships, beauty, nature, humor

Meaningful Moments Exercise

List one or two experiences or moments when life has felt particularly meaningful to you – whether it sounds powerful or mundane. For example, it could be something that helped get you through a difficult day, a time when you felt alive, connected, or flowing.

Self-Love Meditation for those with Chronic Illness



★4.8 • GUIDED

Self Love Meditation (Especially For Chronic Illness)

Katya | positivelychronictravels

<https://insighttimer.com/positivelychronictravels/guided-meditations/self-love-meditation-especially-for-chronic-illness>

Session 9: Wrap-Up

Session Goals:

- 1) Discuss helpful things you have learned over the past 8 weeks and know where to find resources related to topics we have discussed
- 2) Discuss the steps of committed action and ways you wish to use this skill going forward

Methods: We will review group topics from over the past 8 weeks and get feedback on what was helpful. We will discuss the steps of committed action and have you reflect on what you would like to continue working on.



https://josephciarochi.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/act_images_related_to_values_and_commitment.pdf

Committed Action

Think back to some of the values you all identified during our values clarification exercise (family, loved ones, work, etc). Remember, values are what you want your life to be about (ie. What you want to stand for, what you want to do with the time you have, what you want to be remembered for)

The next step after identifying your values is "committed action" (taking action/making changes guided by your values, even if it's difficult or uncomfortable at first). 4 basic steps to committed action (Harris, R. (2009). ACT made simple. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.)

1. Choose an area of your life that is a high priority for change
2. Choose what values you wish to pursue in this area
3. Develop concrete goals guided by those values
4. Take action mindfully

Example 1:

1. *A component of my life I value is: Family*
2. *The value I wish to pursue is: Spend more time with my family*
3. *Develop concrete goals guided by the above values: Call at least once a week, visit at least once a month (if money allows), do what I can for special events*
4. *Take action mindfully*

Example 2:

1. *A component of my life I value is: Education and training*
2. *The value I wish to pursue is: Keep learning*
3. *Develop concrete goals guided by the above values: Attend more free lectures, read more books, attend classes (if money allows)*
4. *Take action mindfully*

Adapted from:

<https://prideinmadness.wordpress.com/2013/02/02/dbt-workbook-committed-action/>

Appendix

Mindfulness Phone Apps:

1. Stop, Breathe, and Think
2. Mindfulness Training App
3. Headspace
4. Breathe2Relax
5. Insight Timer
6. Calm

Mindful Breathing (2 and 5 minute recordings)

- [https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/audio_file/0010/1660951/Controlled Breathing.Voice only.mp3](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/audio_file/0010/1660951/Controlled_Breathing.Voice_only.mp3)
- https://soundcloud.com/anna-kratz/deep-breathing?utm_source=clipboard&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fanna-kratz%252Fdeep-breathing

Leaves on a Stream Recording:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-j4AyHpXQ8E>

Body Scan Meditation:

- <https://www.mindful.org/a-10-minute-body-scan-practice/>

Mountain Meditation

- <https://soundcloud.com/devicer23/01-jon-kabat-zinn-mountain>

Loving Kindness Meditation:

- https://soundcloud.com/jack-kornfield/loving-kindness-meditation?utm_source=clipboard&utm_campaign=wtshare&utm_medium=widget&utm_content=https%253A%252F%252Fsoundcloud.com%252Fjack-kornfield%252Foving-kindness-meditation

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Katya's other meditations for those living with chronic illness

- <https://insighttimer.com/positivelychronictravels>