

It's Hard to Talk About Anxiety and Depression

For those of us who live with a chronic pain condition such as migraine or cluster headaches, all too often depression and anxiety come along for the ride. Sadly, this is frequently not talked about and this could be for many reasons.

- Our doctors may have a tendency to “blame” things on the stress in our lives, overlooking the plain fact that chronic illness is in itself incredibly stressful.
- Sharing with our friends is challenging because if you don't have chronic pain then it's really hard, if not impossible, to “get” chronic pain and what it's like living with it!
- For our families we are often too busy “putting a face” on it because we tend to feel guilty about the things we cannot do and try to avoid being a burden.
- At work it's easier to say, “I'm fine,” “I can do that” or stay silent rather than be truthful, ask for accommodations, and share the reality of this disease with associates and our HR departments.
- In society we tend to isolate or again, focus on “putting a face on it” while trying to survive in a world that is not migraine friendly.

Anxiety and Depression Triggers

However, there are some days when it's simply unavoidable to face that anxiety and depression are a reality, and I wrote about this for Migraine.com in an article called, “When the Rubber Meets the Road: Day 3 of a Migraine.” For each of us the trigger point is likely to be different; for some it's an intermittent thing, for some it's all the time, and there is always the fortunate few who may have been spared so far. Trigger points can be as varied as the following:

1. An intractable migraine that isn't responding to abortive medications
2. Concern about serious side effects from medications
3. Worrying about what is safe to take
4. Trying to figure out how to reschedule or catchup from lost time
5. Depression or discouragement about a stalled weight loss plan
6. Insensitive comments from family, friends, associates or even strangers
7. Intense loneliness from isolation
8. Fear about multiple comorbid conditions and how to balance treatment
9. Visiting a new, or current doctor
10. Trying a new medication
11. Financial worries from lost work or medical bills
12. Inability to care for, or be present with, our children
13. Marriage or dating stresses caused by chronic illness
14. And so the list goes on!

It can be hard to get our heads out of the black hole, a hole that often brings intense loneliness, fear and hopeless in its wake. How do we stop listening to the negative voices that tell us life is no longer worth living? Who can we reach out to for encouragement, strength and connection?

Why Do We Have Depression and Anxiety?

The truth is that there are multiple complex factors that impact depression and anxiety. Here are some of them:

1. The reality of depression and anxiety as a genetic comorbid condition
2. The physiological effect of taking medications over a period of time
3. The emotional impact of ongoing physical pain resulting exhaustion
4. The fear of side effects from medications to try and stop the pain
5. The physiological impact of the disease itself
6. The stress of multiple doctor visits, sometimes negative
7. The exhaustion from fighting insurance companies and appealing denials

Tools For Your Toolbox

These are just a few of the things that may help you feel better, refocus your mind, reduce anxiety, give hope, and bring strength. Different things work for each of us, so feel free to add or subtract whatever works best for you. The more tools you have in your toolbox, the better you'll be able to manage, and it may help to have a written list!

1. **Take a breath:** You've survived this far, and as challenging as this is, you're going to survive this too! Sometimes just realizing that you've survived before can help reduce panic. Take a DEEP breath!
2. **Meditation:** meditation can be a powerful tool even though it can be hard to stop and do this. There are many apps and tools to help with this including: Unwinding Anxiety, Calm and Headspace.
3. **Stretching:** doing basic stretching not only can release some tension in our muscles but can also help reduce anxiety, whether yoga, pilates, or other low impact options.
4. **Listen to music:** Music is powerful for refocusing our thoughts, often inspirational when we are finding it hard to think positively and can be very calming.
5. **Try positive self-talk:** It's often hard to bring our minds back to a good place, and that's when this is so important. "I've got through this before" or, "I'm strong and I am not going to give up."
6. **Get Outside:** try taking a scenic walk when you are physically able to do it, or just step outside, look up at the sky, and breathe! Nature can be incredibly calming and relaxing!
7. **Reach out to a friend:** Preferably someone who understands. Talking, or crying, with a friend can often be all it takes to renew our strength and courage to keep going & face tomorrow.
8. **Ask for help:** This can be hard to do but it's so important to ask even for easy things such as bringing water, a quiet home, doing the laundry or cooking. Don't be afraid to enlist your children in small ways to help!
9. **Talk to your doctor:** You may need medication to treat depression or anxiety, but even if not, it's crucial to have a candid conversation about acute pain management – what is safe to take, how much is safe, etc. It can be stressful to make wise decisions when in pain. Try having a written plan ahead of time!
10. **Be gentle on your body:** Give your body the rest it needs rather than always trying to "push through." Healthy boundaries help us become more resilient. That may mean saying no, cancelling plans, staying in bed, reducing work hours, sleeping more, etc., and that's ok!
11. **Know that it's not just you!** You're not crazy, most of us, if not all, go through this – you are not alone!
12. **Be kind to yourself:** whatever that means to you, doing this often reduces anxiety and depression and provides a distraction from pain! Whatever makes you smile or breathe is good. Here are some ideas:
 - a. **Candlelit bath**
 - b. **Read a book**
 - c. **Watching calming movies**
 - d. **Treating yourself to your favorite food**
 - e. **Doing easy and distracting games or puzzles on your phone or computer**
 - f. **Doing a jigsaw puzzle**
 - g. **Adult coloring, Zentangle, painting or other art therapy**