

# Better Living with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

## *A Patient Guide*

Second Edition  
November 2012



THE  
AUSTRALIAN  
**LUNG**  
FOUNDATION



**Queensland  
Government**

Queensland Health

*"When you can't breathe...nothing else matters"™*

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Queensland Health Statewide Respiratory Clinical Network and The Australian Lung Foundation, COPD National Program – Better Living with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease *A Patient Guide*, 2012.

ISBN 978-0-9872272-0-1

# Managing stress, anxiety and depression

## This chapter will help you to understand:

- What the signs of stress are.
- What you can do if you have anxiety.
- Feelings of helplessness.
- What you can do if you have depression.
- How you can reduce stress.
- Why relaxation practice is important.
- How you can reduce the number of crisis events and manage them.



## What are the signs of stress?

Research tells us that people with chronic disease who enjoy the best quality of life and fewest complications are those who understand their condition and are actively involved in managing their condition.

Stressors, such as illness, financial concerns or relationship difficulties, could cause:

- Your heart to beat faster.
- The muscles of your arms and legs to tremble or shake.
- Your breathing to change.
- You to start sweating.

In response to stress, some people begin to avoid certain situations or activities. Avoidance can be a problem. Continuing to avoid situations or activities that make you feel anxious can reduce your activity level and social contacts. It can also increase your risk of developing anxiety and interfere with your ability to manage your condition.

If you avoid certain situations or activities, speak with your pulmonary rehabilitation facilitator or doctor about how you can gradually re-expose yourself to those situations or activities.

## What can you do if you have anxiety?

In addition to the stressors related to having COPD, the worry people experience when they have shortness of breath can lead to anxiety problems. In a circular relationship, experiencing anxiety or panic attacks can increase a person's breathlessness. It can also make it more difficult to function on a daily basis, achieve goals and maintain relationships.

There are effective treatments for anxiety that you can ask your GP or health care team about. Talking to a mental health professional can increase understanding of anxiety and support a person to learn new skills that reduce symptoms.

Medication such as anti anxiety and anti depressant medication to reduce physical symptoms and stop racing thoughts can also be very helpful.

## What are feelings of helplessness?

The diagnosis of COPD has a significant impact. Everyone with COPD feels helpless to some degree, particularly if experiencing recurring flare ups. However, it is important to remember that these feelings of helplessness are normal and remember that everything you can do to manage your condition helps. The tips on the following page might help you to keep on track.

## What can you do if you have depression?

Not surprisingly, severe or ongoing stress can often lead to depression.

When a person is depressed you might notice changes such as withdrawal or lack of enjoyment in activities or not getting things done. A person may experience sadness, irritability, guilt or worthlessness and say things like “it’s all my fault” or “life isn’t worth living”. They may experience physical symptoms including changes in appetite or sleeping more or less than usual.

If these changes occur consistently for a period of two weeks or more the symptoms may be an indication of depression. If you feel that you or someone close to you may be depressed, speak with your medical team about how to access helpful resources in your area.

Treatment for depression can include psychological treatments or anti depressant medication, or both. It is important to know that anti depressant medications may take four to six weeks before symptoms improve. Also, some medications may have unwanted side effects in the short term, such as increased anxiety, nausea or dizziness. People may also experience some difficulty sleeping or sexual difficulties. Most of these symptoms are likely to be short lived but it is important to advise your doctor if they persist or if you are worried about them.

Medicare rebated services are available if a GP refers you to a mental health professional for treatment for anxiety or depression.

Some people with COPD experience depression. If you believe this is you, speak to your doctor about support available to help.



## How can you reduce stress?

1. **Establish a routine.** Having a regular routine helps maintain balance and increases your sense of control. In your routine, you should include activities you need to do as well as fun activities that you can look forward to.
2. **Eat well and drink plenty of water.** Your body will perform best when you eat well and drink plenty of water. However, if you have been advised to restrict fluids, you should follow this advice.
3. **Exercise regularly.** Talk with your pulmonary rehabilitation facilitator about the type, frequency and intensity of exercise that is right for you. Find out how to upgrade your exercise program as you improve, and plan regular exercise into your routine. If possible, exercise earlier in the day so as not to disturb your sleep.
4. **Get plenty of sleep.** Establish a regular bedtime. A warm bath, shower or milk drink before bed may improve your sleep. If you can't get to sleep after twenty minutes of being in bed, get out of bed and do a quiet activity until you feel tired.
5. **Limit your use of alcohol and other drugs.** Many people use drugs and alcohol to help manage their stress. For example, some people use alcohol and cigarettes to calm down and other people may use coffee, cola or energy drinks to get themselves going. However, drugs and alcohol can have harmful effects on people and can result in dependence.

6. **Maintain your social network.** People with chronic conditions who have few friends and don't get out much may have worse health outcomes. Getting out and catching up with friends is important and you should plan to do this regularly.
7. **Join a local patient support group.** Contact The Australian Lung Foundation to find out about patient support groups near you (phone: 1800 654 301 or website: [www.lungfoundation.com.au](http://www.lungfoundation.com.au)). If a patient support group has not been established in your area, The Australian Lung Foundation can help you to start one.
8. **Maintain interests and hobbies.** Often people who have chronic conditions let go of interests and hobbies because they believe the effort outweighs the benefits. Participating in enjoyable activities can give life meaning and can help you maintain and enhance your skills and abilities.
9. **Be aware of automatic or unhelpful thinking.** When life is busy or stressful, you may respond to events without stopping to consider your response. Before responding, stop and take some deep breaths, count to 10, or go for a short walk and consider whether you need to respond and how you will respond.
10. **Planning and time management.** People who plan how they will apply the skills they have learnt in pulmonary rehabilitation to their home or work life are more likely to use these skills in their daily lives. Effective time management is essential for maintaining your health, work, social and home life. Spread tasks, or parts of tasks, across several days, and build time into your schedule for unexpected events.
11. **Communicate effectively.** Effective communication includes both speaking and listening. Often when you feel under pressure, you can spend all your time speaking or thinking about what you want to say rather than listening. Take the time to listen to what is being said before responding. Assertive communication requires honest and direct discussion that describes the problem, the effect and the solution.

12. **Practice relaxed breathing.** When stressed, or experiencing strong emotions most people tend to breathe faster and shallower; this type of breathing can lead to a feeling of breathlessness and sometimes panic breathing. People who have COPD can minimise the risk of becoming breathless during times of stress or high emotion, by using the relaxed breathing techniques (see chapter 12).



### Why is relaxation practice important?

Scheduling time to relax in your daily or weekly routine is important. Relaxation can be formal, such as guided relaxation practice, or informal, such as watching football or listening to music. Formal relaxation practice helps to:

- Increase your metabolism.
- Slow your heart beat.
- Relax your muscles.
- Slow your breathing.
- Lower your blood pressure.

If you are interested in finding out more about formal relaxation practice, ask your pulmonary rehabilitation co-ordinator for a tip sheet on relaxation. You can also find CDs in bookstores or in your local library or audio downloads on the internet that will guide you through different types of formal relaxation exercises.

## How can you reduce the number of crisis events and manage them?

### Reducing the number of crisis events

- The chance of crisis events occurring due to ill health should be reduced if you use your medication and inhalers appropriately, and remember to eat well and exercise regularly.
- The number of crisis events occurring due to injury, muscle strain or physical exhaustion should be reduced if you increase your exercise tolerance and practise your energy conservation skills.
- The number of crisis events occurring due to stress should be reduced if you practise your relaxation techniques and improve your communication and problem solving skills.

### Managing crisis events

When a crisis event does occur, and you find yourself getting emotionally upset, you will need to decide what you can do to avoid the situation from becoming worse or how you can reduce the emotional impact

of the event. The following strategies may help you manage crisis events:

- Become aware of your expectations. In the past, if a similar crisis event went from bad to worse, it doesn't mean that the current event will also go from bad to worse.
- Become aware of the language you are using and replace unhelpful thoughts with more helpful thoughts. For example, rather than thinking your weekend was a disaster, recognise that it rained on the weekend and, as a result, you were unable to do what you wanted to do.
- Protect yourself against becoming too stressed by developing a plan to deal with a difficult situation. You can mentally rehearse what you might do or say before a potentially challenging event occurs. You can also review how you managed after the event and create options for how you might handle a similar situation if it happens again.
- Don't forget to practice relaxation techniques and use relaxed breathing (see chapter 12).

