



Emotional Wellbeing & Lymphoedema

Lymphoedema is a long-term condition that can have a significant effect on your feelings and emotions, as well as your physical wellbeing. Frequent emotional and psychological experiences may include:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Anger
- Self-consciousness
- Decreased confidence
- Irritability
- Isolation
- Altered body image
- Relationship and desirability/ intimacy issues

The effect Lymphoedema will have on you is often dependent upon your own personal behaviours, upbringing, culture and your social support network. It is important to remember that what is happening in your life today may affect your emotions of Lymphoedema and yet tomorrow maybe different. This is normal. Some people experience a lot of emotional problems, and others do not have any. This information leaflet will help to explain some of the emotions you may be experiencing and identify the areas of your life that Lymphoedema might be having an effect on. It will also provide examples of some coping strategies that can be used to help alleviate some of the unpleasant emotions you may be experiencing. It is common for people with Lymphoedema who wear compression garments to experience some emotional difficulties as the garment can affect normality. It is important to discuss your feelings with your therapist for them to understand the impact that wearing a compression garment may have on your day-to-day life.

A series of video films to help with your Lymphoedema have been made. There are tips and ideas throughout each of the films that you may find of help. The link and QR code are at the bottom of this page.

Emotions

The development of Lymphoedema can often lead to emotions including:-

1. Anxiety

Anxiety is an emotion experienced when you face situations that you perceive to be stressful. The development of Lymphoedema can create confusion and can cause feelings of low self-esteem, decreased confidence and an alteration in body image; all of which can cause anxiety. Increasing your understanding of what Lymphoedema is, and why you may have developed the condition, may

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help to reduce your anxiety. Incorporating relaxation techniques into your daily activities may further help to alleviate feelings of anxiety. It is important to discuss this with your therapist so that options can be considered.

2. Depression

Depression has many physical and psychological symptoms which can affect people to varying degrees.

Persistent feelings of tiredness, tearfulness, altered appetite, loss of interest, low mood, disturbed sleep, decreased confidence, poor self-esteem and loss of libido, are just some of the emotions you may be feeling if you are suffering with depression.

Often these symptoms will affect your quality of life. A diagnosis of Lymphoedema may affect some of the activities you participate in including your job, hobbies and family life. This change in lifestyle, as well as the alteration in body image, can cause some of the symptoms of depression. Talking to friends, relatives, or others diagnosed with Lymphoedema in a safe environment can help. There are Lymphoedema Support Groups on line and in Facebook that can be useful. If you do have symptoms of depression, talking to your Lymphoedema therapist or GP is important as there are many options available to ease these unpleasant emotions which include counselling and/or medication.

3. Anger

When diagnosed with an incurable long term condition, such as Lymphoedema, feelings of anger can often occur. Development of Lymphoedema cannot always be predicted and those that do develop symptoms will often experience thoughts of “Why me?” and “I’ve got Lymphoedema, what else is going to happen?” or “What have I done wrong?”

There is often no explanation to some of your questions and this can lead to feelings of frustration and anger. Trying to understand what is causing your feelings of anger can help. Relaxation or other activities can help to control your feelings and promote a positive outlook. Moving your body, or simply going for a walk, can really help manage these emotions.

Body Image

Lymphoedema causes swelling of the body which can alter your physical appearance. Depending upon the degree of swelling you have developed it may not be possible for you to wear the style of clothes, jewellery, or footwear you have previously worn. If you wear a compression garment, this may draw unwanted attention to the affected area. All of these factors may result in an alteration of your body image and can lead to feelings of self-consciousness, reduced self-esteem and decreased self-confidence.

Sometimes social interactions and occasions can cause you anxiety. Gaining support and advice from family, friends, GP and the Lymphoedema team can help to ease some of these feelings. It is important to discuss your feelings with your Lymphoedema therapist as they may be able to advise you on a personal management plan which can prevent unnecessary questions during social events and holidays. You may also find that compression garments in different colours are more

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cosmetically acceptable - again talk to your therapist and ask if the garment comes in another colour. Often there are ways to manage your Lymphoedema privately such as wearing your garment at home or in the night.

Relationships

As Lymphoedema can result in an alteration in body image and emotions, it can have an impact on the relationships you have with others. Unwanted attention may be attracted when out socially if your Lymphoedema/compression garment is visible.

Often relationships are formed and shared when participating in hobbies and activities. If your Lymphoedema is impacting on your ability to participate in previous activities, you may feel isolated and excluded. If you experience these feelings, talk to your Lymphoedema therapist as it may be possible to adapt the activity to allow for participation. Hobbies such as horse riding, knitting, or even extreme sports can still be done with slight moderations.

Even a slight swelling can lead to feelings of embarrassment and insecurity. Sexual relationships may also be affected due to embarrassment or pain in certain positions. Talking with your partner is encouraged to help alleviate some of these difficulties. If this is not possible, professional help is available. Speak in confidence to your Lymphoedema therapist or GP for support, guidance and referral (if appropriate).

Occupation

Lymphoedema can affect your current employment as well as daily activities in the home. This can cause symptoms of anxiety and distress especially if a change of career may be required or when there are financial implications. It is important to discuss your Lymphoedema with your employer so that they are aware of your condition. If your current role is exacerbating your Lymphoedema, speak to your Lymphoedema therapist and/or employer for guidance. It is important to get written information for your employer on Lymphoedema. Simple advice on not spending all day sitting at your desk etc.

Do's and Don'ts

- Do talk to someone about how you are feeling e.g. family/ friend
 - Do talk to your GP or Lymphoedema therapist about referral to an appropriate specialist e.g. counsellor/ support nurse
 - Do learn about relaxation and breathing exercises as they can be beneficial
 - Do your Simple Lymphatic Drainage (SLD) as this can promote relaxation and reduce your swelling
 - Do join a support group - talking helps
 - Do participate in exercises such as swimming, Tai Chi and Pilates, as physical activity is known to improve emotional wellbeing - even just going for a walk!
 - Do consider complementary therapies such as aromatherapy and reflexology as they can promote feeling of well being
- Don't suffer in silence – help is available

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Patient Story

Jayne was extremely anxious when she was diagnosed with Lymphoedema, as she was concerned that her Cancer had returned. She felt very angry and self-conscious of her hand being swollen and found that the general public questions about her compression garment was a constant reminder of her Cancer journey.

Jayne discussed her feelings with her GP and therapist, and found that she wasn't alone in feeling these emotions. Talking, gaining control through self-massage and exercise helped greatly. Jayne advises anybody who feels ongoing sadness to talk to their GP or therapist.



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