

Lesson 2 - How arthritis can affect your mental health

In this lesson, we dive deeper into recognizing the signs and symptoms of worsening mental health in people with arthritis. By understanding these signs, you will be better equipped to identify when better self-care or professional care may be needed.



Key points

1. Recognizing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and excess stress can help individuals living with arthritis seek appropriate support and care.
2. There are self-screening tools that look for **signs or symptoms** or red flags for worsening mental health. These tools do not provide a diagnosis.
3. Having open communication with and seeking support from friends and family about mental health challenges can make a meaningful difference for people with arthritis.



What are some signs of declining mental health?

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Depression, anxiety, and stress are common in people with arthritis. Recognizing these symptoms can help individuals take proactive steps towards seeking appropriate support and care.

1. Some common signs you may be experiencing excess stress include¹:
 - increased muscle tension (e.g., sore neck and shoulders)
 - jaw clenching, or grinding your teeth at night
 - frequent headaches
 - feeling shaky
 - stomach/digestive problems
2. Some common signs of depression include^{2,3,4}:
 - persistent feelings of sadness (i.e., lasting more than 2 weeks)
 - loss of interest in activities you enjoy
 - change in appetite or weight
 - difficulty concentrating
 - feelings of worthlessness or guilt
 - feeling overwhelmed
 - feeling exhausted (even after sleeping 8 hours)
 - thoughts of self-harm or that life is too hard

3. Some common signs you may be experiencing anxiety can include^{3,4}:

- excessive worry
- restlessness
- irritability
- trouble falling asleep
- chest pain or feeling like your heart is racing
- chronic exhaustion

It is important to note that mental health can also directly influence arthritis. For example, individuals with arthritis who are depressed or highly anxious also experience worse pain and, disability, and greater difficulty taking care of themselves.⁵ Taking good care of yourself means attending to both your mental and physical health.



Is my mental health at risk?

Tools that look or “screen” for signs or symptoms of depression or anxiety can help a person self-monitor mental health. These tools help to evaluate a person’s mental health and track any changes or concerns over time. Examples of self-screening tools include questionnaires or surveys designed to assess common symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress levels, risky behaviours like excessive drinking, and the absence of positive mental health behaviours like exercise and getting enough sleep.

By using these screening tools, people with arthritis can become better aware of their mental health status and identify patterns or trends. This self-awareness can help people have meaningful conversations with health care providers and seek appropriate care when needed. **It is important to remember that these tools are not designed to diagnose individuals but instead serve as indicators that a conversation with a health professional is warranted.**

If you are concerned about your mental health and wellness (or trusted friends and family have told you they are concerned about you), talk with your family doctor, your rheumatologist or speak with a mental health professional available through a **mental health centre** either in your community or on national hotlines.



Mental health assessment tools

The Canadian Mental Health Association’s Mental Health Meter allows individuals to reflect on their unique strengths and identify areas where their level of mental fitness could be improved to help you cope with all of life’s up and downs. Please **click here** to access the Mental Health Meter.



What to do if you are in a crisis

If you need immediate help, call a national Crisis Helpline (9-8-8 in Canada or the USA). In Canada, you can also visit **this website** to learn about national and provincial services including free programs and local contacts.

References

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