

## Lesson 3 - Developing coping strategies for mental health challenges

In this lesson, we will review proven strategies that can help you manage your mental health and your arthritis more effectively. By the end of the Lesson, you will have a better understanding of why these strategies are important and the value of seeking the right kind of support to improve your mental health and well-being.



### Key points

1. Lifestyle changes can play an important role in maintaining physical and mental well-being while living with arthritis.
2. Activities that promote relaxation and enjoyment can reduce stress and improve mood.
3. Being able to identify and challenge negative thoughts is an essential tool for regulating mood and reactions.
4. If symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress persist or significantly interfere with everyday life, relationships, and work, it is time to speak with a qualified mental health professional who can provide guidance and specialized treatment when needed.



### Making lifestyle changes

A healthy lifestyle is the foundation of mental well-being, and especially important while living with arthritis. Regular physical activity improves both physical and mental health, making you feel more peaceful, calm, and happy. Regular exercise has shown to be as effective as an antidepressant medication or psychotherapy for moderate to mild depression and anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Even for those with more severe mental health symptoms, exercise remains an important complementary therapy. As a result, in Canada, the College of Canadian Family Physicians now recommends physical activity as a first line treatment for mild to moderate depression and anxiety. Best of all, unlike exercising for health benefits, the mood benefits of physical activity are immediate and right away.

The guideline for promoting mental health recommends a minimum of 150 minutes of exercise at moderate intensity or a minimum of 75 minutes at vigorous intensity, in bouts of at least 25 minutes over 3 to 5 days per week.<sup>2</sup> Moderate-intensity exercise means moving enough to warm up your body and breathe a little harder, like brisk walking or gentle cycling, where you can still talk but not sing – and it helps keep your joints flexible and your muscles strong **without causing extra pain**. As all forms of moderate or vigorous physical activity count, look for opportunities to add activities that you enjoy doing into your daily routine.

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What you eat matters – not only for your joints and physical health, but also for your mental health. A growing body of evidence links diets high in ultra-processed foods (including sugary drinks, fast foods, processed meats) with elevated risk of depression and anxiety<sup>3</sup>. Conversely, more traditional “whole food” or anti-inflammatory dietary patterns (rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, healthy fats) appear to support better mental health<sup>4</sup>. For someone with arthritis, adopting a diet that emphasises minimally processed, nutrient-dense foods can serve to enhance overall wellbeing<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore, 7-9 hours of quality sleep each night plays a crucial role in maintaining mental health – especially for people living with arthritis. Research shows that individuals with conditions such as Rheumatoid arthritis or Osteoarthritis frequently experience sleep disturbances (for example, difficulty falling or staying asleep) and that poor sleep is strongly linked with poor mood, higher fatigue and greater pain<sup>6</sup>. In addition to the physical discomfort of arthritis, being sleep deprived can amplify the risk of anxiety and depression and perpetuate the negative spiral<sup>7</sup>. Building a consistent sleep routine which includes minimising caffeine and screen-time before bed can support mental health. Learn more about sleep on the [National Sleep Foundation website](#).



## Manage stress more effectively

Stress is a common experience for individuals living with arthritis, and effectively managing stress is important for mental well-being.<sup>8</sup> Various stress management techniques can be helpful in reducing stress when you experience it, and in lowering your stress levels overall. Relaxation exercises, deep breathing exercises, mindfulness, and meditation are proven tools that help you relax and feel less anxious (in addition to exercise).<sup>9</sup> These techniques are simple to learn and can be incorporated into your daily routine, providing moments of calm even when sitting in meetings at work or waiting at a traffic light in rush hour. There are many apps available that can teach you how to take deeper breaths and meditate.

Engaging in activities that promote relaxation and enjoyment such as hobbies, reading, or listening to music, can also reduce stress in the short- and long-term. Look for activities that you enjoy and help you unwind as these can help improve your outlook and mental wellness.



## Use mind-body strategies to reframe negative thinking

Mind-body strategies can be particularly helpful and are commonly used in most treatment approaches and self-help programs. These techniques often involve identifying distortions in thinking, challenging negative thoughts, and “reframing” how you view

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stressful events. Behaviour can then be changed by learning new skills such as self-monitoring your emotions, proactive positive self-talk, and keeping a gratitude journal. By recognizing and challenging distressing thoughts, emotions and behaviours, you can change how much stress you experience and the way it affects you.

In Canada, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) offers a comprehensive **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) guide**<sup>10</sup> that can teach you how to identify and challenge intrusive thoughts and negative perceptions. Anxiety Canada also outlines common “**Thinking Traps**” or cognitive distortions such as catastrophizing, mind-reading, and all-or-nothing thinking.



## Find professional support

If symptoms of stress, depression, and anxiety persist more than a few weeks and significantly interfere with daily functioning and quality of life, it may be time to consider speaking with a mental health professional. Qualified mental health professionals have undergone the training and have the experience necessary to provide guidance and support to help people with arthritis better manage their mental health. Seeking professional help is a sign of strength and self-care.

Mental health professionals, such as licensed psychologists, social workers, certified psychotherapists, occupational therapists, and employee assistance counselors can help people develop coping skills, enhance self-awareness, and navigate the emotional complexities of living with arthritis.

## References

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