

## Lesson 6 - Developing a long-term mental health care plan

As we have discussed, people with arthritis experience higher levels of anxiety and depression. They are also less likely and able to engage in behaviours that help them feel and function better overall, such as participating in physical activity, healthy eating, engaging in activities they enjoy, spending time with others, taking medications as prescribed, and taking an active role in their healthcare.<sup>1</sup> In this final lesson, we will discuss how to develop a long-term plan to sustain mental well-being and become a more proactive member of your healthcare team.



### Key points

1. Create a realistic, feasible and personalized plan to safeguard your physical and mental well-being.
2. Use proven coping and behavioural strategies each day to sustain mental well-being.
3. Recognize early signs of stress, anxiety and depression so you can feel better emotionally and reduce the likelihood and severity of future episodes.
4. Celebrate your progress and success to reinforce positive behaviors and encourage you to continue prioritizing your mental well-being.



### Creating your mental health care plan

Creating your mental health care plan The European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR) has created recommendations in 2021 for the implementation of self-care strategies in people with inflammatory arthritis, including the need to assess mental health regularly.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to create a realistic, feasible, and personalized plan to promote better emotional well-being and recover faster when you are impacted by stress, anxiety and depression while living with arthritis. This plan must take into consideration your unique needs, preferences, values, and goals. You'll need to set targets and monitor your progress to make sure your mental health care plan is working, even as needs and life circumstances change. This may involve a combination of self-care activities, develop new skills and coping strategies, and find professional care when needed.



## Combining different strategies to sustain your mental health wellness

Simple habits, like deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises, stress management, and thinking tools from Cognitive Behavioural Therapies, can make a real difference in how you feel and function every day. Many people find that engaging in hobbies, spending time in nature, meeting up regularly with friends, or practicing meditation and mindfulness can improve their mental health in lasting ways. For many, brief work with qualified mental health professionals can help them move quickly through stressful periods and recover their sense of well-being. By weaving proven strategies into everyday life, and checking in with yourself regularly, you will strengthen your resilience, and overall mental health.



## What to watch for

Mental health can decline in subtle ways over time and recognizing the signs early can make a real difference in how quickly you can feel better. Emotional signs may include sadness or a sense of emptiness that doesn't let up, difficulty concentrating or making decisions, worry that feels uncontrollable and doesn't go away, irritability and growing frustration, or a decline in overall well-being and quality of life. Important physical signs to watch out for include a change in sleep (insomnia or oversleeping) or appetite (increased or decreased), or even more reliance on caffeine. Social signs might include avoiding friends, family or things you generally enjoy, or feeling disconnected and numb. Over time, these feelings may result in an increased use of alcohol or drugs to change how you feel. If any of these signs persists more than two weeks or begins to interfere with everyday life and relationships, it may be time to reach out for support as described in the previous section. Regular self-screening and open communication with your arthritis health care team can help guide decisions about your mental health.



## Celebrating success and working on continuous growth

Living with arthritis is a journey, and every step forward is worth recognizing. By celebrating your successes, you reinforce positive habits and foster the motivation needed to continue prioritizing your physical and mental well-being. Personal growth too is ongoing. Through self-reflection and by staying open to learning new ways of coping and regulating mood and behaviour, you build resilience and strength. Healthy behaviours are a form of selfcare and can also support mental well-being. Just like physical health, your mental well-being also requires ongoing attention and regular maintenance to ensure it is resilient, and ready to handle life's highs and lows.

## References

1. Vestergaard, S. B., et al. (2023, June). *Self-management behaviour, anxiety, and depression in patients with inflammatory arthritis: A cross-sectional nationwide study among >12,000 Danish patients* (Abstract OP0176-HPR). Presented at the European Alliance of Associations for Rheumatology (EULAR) 2023 Congress, Kilchberg, Switzerland.
2. Nikiphorou, E., et al. (2021). 2021 EULAR recommendations for the implementation of self-management strategies in patients with inflammatory arthritis. *Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases*, 80 (10), 1278–1285. <https://doi.org/10.1136/annrheumdis-2021-220249>