

Guidelines for Difficult Situations

Learning To Manage Emotional Distress

The diagnosis of a serious illness or the recurrence of disease symptoms after a period of relative good health can affect the very core of our beings. They can affect:

- **Our self-esteem** – How we see ourselves
- **Our self-confidence** – What we feel we can do and achieve
- **Our sense of worth** – How we think others see us

Having a comfortable level of self-esteem, confidence and self-worth are all central to healthy emotional and psychological functioning in our day-to-day life.

Following a diagnosis of IBD, it's expected that you'd feel some degree of shock, anger, anxiety and depression. It's fairly certain that these are things you'd much rather not be feeling.

Allowing yourself to experience uncomfortable emotions is part of the road to feeling better. It's about acknowledging your feelings and recognising that you're entitled to have them. This is often referred to as a 'normalising' process. It takes away the responsibility or guilt you may be harbouring unnecessarily, for what may well be a legitimate experience.

Normalisation of the experience doesn't necessarily alleviate all the uncomfortable emotions but it does reduce the sense that you're fully responsible for your feelings, or that you could alter reality if only you tried harder. Try not to judge your feelings too harshly. They could be offering you important clues as to how you can come to terms with your experience of IBD and assist you in making decisions about your future. Be patient with yourself and with what you're feeling.

The next stage is to identify a problem-solving strategy that works for you.

Health professionals have developed a management strategy that is simple in design and based on four key ideas. It's easily remembered by the word it spells COPE.

C for Creativity

O for Optimism

P for Planning

E for Expert Information

The first step in the management strategy is to identify a central issue. Then refine the issue and simplify it so that you can understand it in its true essence. You may be experiencing many different problems that all seem to be inter-related. But try to choose one(s) that you can work on and which will make a significant and positive difference to your life.

Managing Difficult Emotional Experiences

Despite all our positive efforts to manage the emotions of a diagnosis or ongoing illness, sometimes nothing seems to work. There might be times when you think that you're completely losing your mind. This is not the case and it could be that you're also experiencing depression or anxiety.

There's established medical evidence that a diagnosis of Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis can result in a proportion of people developing either depression or anxiety. These are very real but treatable medical conditions that can and should be addressed.

Like IBD itself, depression and anxiety are not something within your control, and this is often difficult to understand at first. But effective treatments are available that will allow you to achieve emotional balance and gain a greater sense of control. This will be an important step in your overall recovery.

Depression

It's only natural to feel down or distressed at times when living with IBD. You might have depression if, over a two-week period, you find that:

- you feel worthless or excessively guilty
- you feel sad, down or miserable most of the time

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- you've lost pleasure or interest in most of your normal activities.

You might feel these alongside these other symptoms:

- a loss or gain of weight or a decrease in appetite
- sleep disturbances
- slowing down, feeling restless, or feeling overwhelmed
- feeling tired or having no energy
- experiencing poor concentration or difficulties thinking
- having recurrent thoughts of death.

Discuss the symptoms with your doctor or clinical team as soon as possible. Your symptoms could be the result of your condition or the treatment you're receiving, or it may be that you're experiencing depression as well. Your clinical team will be able to work it out with you and then explore the best treatment options.

Anxiety

Another common condition associated with IBD is anxiety. We all experience anxiety from time to time and it could be difficult to know what's normal and what's not, particularly if you have been unwell for some time. Also, the signs and symptoms of an anxiety disorder tend to develop gradually over time, which can add to the overall confusion.

You might have an anxiety disorder if, over a six-month period, on more days than not, you experience:

- feeling very worried
- finding it hard to stop worrying
- discovering that your anxiety is making it difficult for you to do everyday activities.

Discuss the symptoms with your doctor or clinical team. The anxiety you're feeling could be the result of your IBD or the treatment you're receiving, or it may be that you have an anxiety disorder. Your clinical team will be able to work it out with you and explore the best treatment options.

Finding Support

If you have concerns about a health condition that you'd like to discuss with a qualified health professional, you're advised to:

- Contact your doctor
- In an emergency situation, call triple zero – 000
- Contact NURSE-ON-CALL (www.health.vic.gov.au/nurseoncall/) at 1300 60 60 24 for health advice from a registered nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week



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Organisations that can assist with mental health concerns are listed below

Australian Psychological Society (APS)

APS is the premier professional organisation for psychologists in Australia, representing over 21,000 members. One of its services, the APS Find a Psychologist Service, is an online, telephone, and e-mail service for the general public, GPs, and other health professionals who are seeking the advice and assistance of a qualified APS Psychologist.

<https://www.psychology.org.au/FaP/>

beyondblue

beyondblue is a national not-for-profit organisation that works to achieve an Australian community that understands depression and anxiety, empowering all Australians, at any life-stage, to seek help.

www.beyondblue.org.au

Parentline

Parentline provides a statewide confidential telephone counselling service to parents and carers of children aged from birth to 18 years. Professional counsellors are able to explore a variety of issues that affect parenting and relationships.

T: 13 22 89 (8am to midnight 7 days a week)

www.parentline.vic.gov.au

SANE Australia

SANE Australia is a national charity helping all Australians affected by mental illness lead a better life—through support, training, and education.

T: 1800 18 SANE (7263) (9 to 5 Monday to Friday)

www.sane.org

IBDclinic.org.au

IBDclinic.org.au is an online mental health service offering information, assessment, and online treatment programs ("eTherapy") for anxiety and/or depression for individuals with diagnosed with Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). This website and its intervention programs are free and available to all individuals with IBD and also any health provider to use with their patients.

There are two 6-week IBD-focused psychological treatment programs. After an initial assessment, participants will have the option to undertake either a depression-focused treatment program or an anxiety-focused treatment program.

www.ibdclinic.org.au/