

Emotional First Aid Strategies

- Sarah Collins

This list of tips was provided and presented by NRAS Ambassador, Sarah Collins during our NRAS Live: Mental Health & Wellbeing with RA, which aired on Wednesday 19th April 2023.

- Don't underestimate the importance of sleep, but equally don't get too hung up about it. Sleep will follow when your mind is at peace and your pain is under control. Sleep diaries have their uses but sometimes people can focus on them too much.
- If you cannot sleep, don't stay in bed for longer than 20 minutes. Bed must only be associated with sleep and sex. Get up and do something soothing – **but avoid screens!**
- Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that mediates satisfaction, happiness and optimism. Increase your Serotonin production by eating foods which contain Tryptophan.
 - Tryptophan is found in avocados, turkey, brown rice, bananas, milk, salmon, pumpkin seeds and cheese amongst many other foods.
- Avoid caffeine and aerobic exercise for several hours before bedtime.
 - Aerobic exercise is anything cardiovascular.

- Ask a person you can trust to listen as you talk about your feelings – without trying to find you solutions.
- Remember, whatever you feel is normal; its coping with a chronic, debilitating condition which is abnormal. Don't let anyone imply that there's a right or wrong way to experience RA. You *will* find your own way!

Alternatively, contact the **NRAS Helpline on 0800 98 7650**. NRAS' experienced staff are specially trained to take your call. They cannot give medical advice, but they are extremely well-informed, genuinely empathic people who care very much about anyone suffering with RA.

There is also **HealthUnlocked** too, a platform where you'll find a caring RA community ready to share knowledge and experiences. *Or to simply say Hi to at 3 in the morning!*

- Try keeping a journal. Write to yourself recording your feelings and hopes and fears. You could put your negative thoughts on one page and counteract them with positive thoughts on the opposite page. Hopefully you will reread it in the not -too- distant future and see how life has improved for you.
 - Try and write for no longer than 15 minutes a day. Research has shown that any more than that creates too much introspection.
- It is normal to experience low mood. Take some time to consider whether there is anything specific and achievable you could change in your life that would make a difference. It will strengthen you to take control and make adaptations

- Don't suffer in silence. Remind yourself that the cause of your low mood might be fatigue and pain, and this can be managed in conjunction with your Rheumatology team.
 - If you can't get through to them, keep trying. Leave messages on the Helpline if there is one; email your consultant's secretary; ask your GP to contact the Rheumatology department on your behalf – leave them in no doubt that your disease activity is not controlled, and you need help. *But don't tell them I said so!*
 - Hold onto the prospect of remission.
 - Rest and pace yourself. *I hate giving into it too, but it works!*
 - Get out into nature – even if that's driving somewhere and sitting with the window down.
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- Try to stay in touch with friends to avoid becoming lonely and isolated. Friends might be acutely aware of their own good health and sad for you, so they retreat.
 - Tackle that possibility with them and find activities you can join in with. Loneliness has been found to increase pain and depress the immune system.
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- When we're anxious we tend towards shallow, rapid breathing. This increases the amount of oxygen in our blood stream and causes us to feeling jittery.
 - You can correct this by breathing in through your nose as you count to 7 and exhaling slowly through your mouth while you count to 11. Repeat the exercise until you feel calmer.

OR...

- You could breathe in and out of a paper bag for a few minutes so that you take in carbon dioxide to offset the effect of too much oxygen. If you have heart and lung problems, please check these techniques out with your GP first.

Not knowing what you're dealing with can be stressful and Information is empowering. Why not try SMILE-RA, the FREE online e-learning programme. This provides you with short courses to help you learn more about life with RA. There are plenty of modules including, Newly Diagnosed, Meeting the Rheumatology Team, Medicines, Managing Pain and Flares and much more to come!

These modules will help you understand your RA, equip you with evidence-based information, advice and demonstrate that you are not alone. Your experiences are being shared and understood by thousands of people now living satisfying and fruitful lives despite RA!

Look out for the second edition of the Emotions, Relationships and Sexuality book now renamed: Relationships Matter.

Sadly, I don't know you so I can't predict what will be beneficial to you but I hope that some or all of those tips will strike a chord and be helpful.

Sarah Collins