Your Guide to Osteoarthritis Symptoms and How to Manage Them

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How to Cope With the Symptoms of OA

Most people can list the typical symptoms of osteoarthritis (OA) with ease; however it's a little harder to come up with effective coping mechanisms for management of these symptoms.

Before I jump into how I would suggest coping with the symptoms of osteoarthritis, I want define what I mean when I use the word "cope." I understand coping to be the ability to manage a difficult entity or situation without the assumption that it will be mastered or go away in the near future.

I still struggle with the symptoms of osteoarthritis on a daily basis but I believe that with each passing year, I have learned how to live with osteoarthritis and how to cope with the disease better. With that clarification, the following are a few strategies I personally have learned or used to cope with each symptom caused by osteoarthritis.

Direct Symptoms

Pain

If I were to create a hypothetical survey that asked all osteoarthritis suffers what the worst symptom of their disease is, I am willing to bet there would be one clear winner by a longshot. In fact, I am willing to describe this symptom as the Usain Bolt, Michael Jordan (sorry Lebron), and gold-medal winner of osteoarthritis symptoms.

What is it? You guessed it — PAIN.

In the chronic condition that is osteoarthritis, the pain is what hinders our quality of life the most. It is what prevents us from conducting our daily activities and enjoying our hobbies. Osteoarthritis pain is often assumed to simply be a deep, achy, or nagging sensation as advertised on television. But osteoarthritis can also cause pain that would be described as sharp, intense, severe, and burning in nature. Unfortunately, the chronic pain caused by osteoarthritis is also the most complex symptom and most difficult one to cope with.

I am going to purposefully keep my strategies to cope with pain fairly vague. This is because there is such a diverse array of therapies and the success of these remedies is so specific to the person, the severity of their condition, and the location of their osteoarthritis.

Know What Relieves the Symptom in the Short- and Long-Term

It is crucial to identify what therapies are helpful in the short and long-term. For example: my choice of pain relievers help to keep me functioning during acute flare-ups.

However, a core exercise program, stretching, and along with medical therapy helps relieve my symptoms in the long-term. Likely it will be through a lot of trial-and-error, but it is important for you to identify what provides you

the best relief when you have a flare-up of pain versus pain relief on a normal day.

Proper identification and management of the short-term versus long-term pain regimen will likely involve the help of a healthcare professional that is aware of your condition.

Avoid Stressors

Another way to stay ahead is to identify key stressors, whether they are physical or emotional, that exacerbate the pain.

Physical stress may include any specific movement or activity that exceeds your physical capabilities. I have learned over the years through a painful trial-and-error, which chores around the house and activities of daily living can flare-up my pain.

Although it's not practical to simply avoid that activity forever, modifying the activity and taking precautions can be very helpful in preventing a flare-up of pain. Similar to physical stressors, emotional stress can aggravate your arthritic pain.

By identifying any potential patterns of these exacerbating factors, you can learn how to either avoid them altogether or be prepared for when they may bring the onset of pain.

Stiffness

If I were to go off that same hypothetical survey, I am again willing to bet that stiffness would get the silver medal in symptoms.

The way I try to describe it to people who don't have osteoarthritis is: imagine waking up the morning after an intense workout and feeling various areas of your body actively resisting your every motion. Well that's similar to how it feels to be stiff when you have arthritis, except it doesn't ever go away. I have been plagued by stiffness ever since I developed arthritis in my spine and it is an important symptom to learn how to cope with.

Gentle Stretching and Movement

Believe me when I say this — stretching is a chore for me. Growing up, I was the guy who never stretched before practice or a game.

A stretching routine can be really tedious and monotonous, but also very important. Stretching helps, if only for a short period of time, loosen up the area surrounding the arthritic join.

From a practical standpoint, a stretching routine doesn't need to consume an entire hour of your day. Even stretching for a few minutes at a time can be immensely helpful. If you are unsure of what stretches to do to help your joint, I would ask either your doctor or a trained physical therapist.

Next page: coping with direct symptoms of OA.

Direct Symptoms

Osteoarthritis sufferers, myself included, have the tendency to stay in one spot for a prolonged period of time. This is because even the thought of moving with an arthritic joint can be painful!

However, staying in a fixed position for a long time, such as on the couch watching TV or in a long car ride, can exacerbate the stiffness. For the sake of your painful joints and reducing stiffness, it is important to move around at least every hour.

Breaking up your fixed position by walking around for a minute or two can greatly reduce the amount of stiffness you experience.

Heat Therapy

Heat therapy can drastically reduce the amount of stiffness you experience due to your arthritis. Heat can come in the form of a disposable heat pads or permanent heat sources like heating blankets.

The disposable heat pads are great to stick on most areas of the body and work up to eight hours usually, but can be expensive if you're trying to use it every day. A heating blanket is also great because you can stick it on indefinitely and it's a worthwhile investment.

My only warning for heat therapy is to make sure you don't maintain direct exposure to the skin for prolonged periods of time, because it can cause burns.

Swelling

I am fortunate that I experience minimal swelling, but that is not the case for many other arthritis suffers.

The irritation caused by the friction of worn down surfaces can often lead to swelling and fluid collection around the arthritic joints. This swelling is both uncomfortable and can add to the cycle of pain that arthritis suffers experiences.

Cold Therapy

Cooling or icing the swollen joint for 15 to 20 minutes every hour can be very effective to reduce swelling. Unfortunately I am not aware of any disposable cooling therapies that can be used on the go (feel free to let me know if there are) so it mostly will be used at home.

However, there are great ice wraps out there than can be taken straight from the freezer and fold to the contour of your joint. My disclaimer for ice therapy is similar to heat therapy in that it is best not to apply ice directly to the skin because it can cause damage.

Know When to Seek Help From Healthcare Professionals

You can do everything in your power to manage the swelling and still feel like you're losing the battle. If you feel this way, you're not alone!

However, swelling that is resistant to home remedies could be a sign of an underlying problem and it could be time to seek the help of a healthcare professional. The expert advice and therapies provided by a healthcare professional to reduce swelling can help immensely.

Indirect Symptoms

Although it can be argued that these symptoms are not a direct manifestation of osteoarthritis, many sufferers of the disease experience these symptoms.

Fatigue

Fatigue can be a natural result of having osteoarthritis. It can be exhausting to deal with an unpleasant feelings brought on by the disease for days on end.

Doctor's appointments, osteoarthritis medications, and worrying about the pain can take an emotional and physical toll on your energy. Another reason for OA fatigue can be that the discomfort of osteoarthritis does not go away simply by resting or lying down; it can be very difficult to get a good night's sleep or concentrate on relaxing

if one is constantly in pain.

Exercise and Nutrition

A proper nutrition and regular exercise program help to increase your energy when dealing with fatigue. Certain foods, such as fruits, vegetables, yogurt, nuts, and lean meats are known to give a boost to your energy.

Sugar, simple carbohydrates, and fried food are prone to making you feel lethargic and lacking energy. Changing the frequency of your meals can also help to increase energy levels and it varies person to person.

Next page: More tips for coping with indirect symptoms of OA.

Indirect Symptoms

Some people achieve a boost with multiple small meals throughout the day, while others prefer the concept of three solid meals every day.

You would think that exercising would tire a fatigued person even more, but it is quite the opposite. Aerobic exercise has been show to spark the mitochondria in our body's cells to produce more energy to meet the increased energy requirements created by exercise.

Although it is probably difficult to exercise with the symptoms of osteoarthritis, one can still try light exercise such as using a stationary bike, short walks outside, and water aerobic exercises.

Maintaining a Regular Sleep Schedule

Having a regular time to wake up each morning and go to bed each night can help with sleep and overall energy levels. Regular sleep events can help strengthen circadian rhythms and leads to regular times of sleep onset.

It can be difficult to get the recommended eight hours in today's world, but every bit of consistent sleep can help with the fatigue attributed to living with osteoarthritis.

Relaxation Techniques

Relaxation techniques can help ease your mind and distract you from pain. Focused breathing exercises, guided imagery, and meditation for arthritis are all effective ways to relax yourself, reduce stress, and decrease fatigue.

Similar to stretching for stiffness, finding a few minutes a day to practice relaxation therapies can help increase your ability to sleep at night and overall energy levels.

Anxiety and Depression

Recent studies indicate that anxiety, depression, and chronic pain disorders, such as osteoarthritis, often occur together. The stress associated in living with chronic pain can perpetuate or create anxiety disorders and depression.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, studies demonstrated that people with severe depression feel more intense pain.

The research shows there may be a physiologic cause for this connection; the link between inflammation and depression may due to higher than normal levels of inflammatory proteins called cytokines that people with depression have in their body. Thus, anxiety, depression, and chronic pain can join together in a perpetual and repeating cycle.

Support

Support, support, SUPPORT! I have alluded to support in many of my previous articles. We all need an adequate support system to survive this thing we call life.

However, those with chronic diseases need to rely on support more often than the average person. Osteoarthritis sufferers deal with negative thoughts throughout the day and constant reminders of what they are unable to do, but support can help us get through these negative influences.

Support can come in a variety of forms; it could be someone who helps with tasks you are physically unable to do, someone willing to lend a sympathetic ear, or a person who is going through the same ordeal. Potential sources of support could be a trained therapist, family member, significant other, close friend, or even pet.

Even if you can't identify a person, joining a support group can also be just as effective. It is important to identify who composes your support system when it comes to coping with emotional impact osteoarthritis can have on your mood.

Try to Keep a Positive Mindset

This is one of the most difficult, but effective goals to achieve. Keeping a positive mindset can be crucial to your quality of life.

In order to do this, you should embrace the idea of viewing the world with a "glass half-full" approach. It is important to focus more on the activities that you can still do rather than the activities you are not able to do due to the symptoms of osteoarthritis.

You can't always control your physical condition, but you can dictate your emotional reaction to the symptoms of osteoarthritis. Going along with the previous topic of support, it is also important to surround yourself with positive people, who can help you to continue to think positively.

People with osteoarthritis can suffer from a multitude of symptoms. These symptoms vary from the direct symptoms of pain, stiffness and swelling to the indirect symptoms of fatigue, anxiety, and depression.

Fortunately, there are coping strategies for each of these symptoms that I have learned during my time suffering from osteoarthritis. The direct symptoms can be alleviated by home remedies such as ice or heat therapy, while those that are resistant to the home remedies may require the help of a healthcare professional.

The indirect symptoms can be alleviated by modifications in your lifestyle, such as improved exercise and nutrition, or seeking the support of others to help you through your struggle. Although I can't offer any quick and easy cures, I hope you find these strategies helpful in your pursuit of living a happy and successful life with osteoarthritis.