

Managing Mental Health Symptoms

According to the Canadian Standard Association (CSA)'s Standard Z1003, Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, positive mental health is a state of well-being in which the individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to their community. Mental health symptoms resulting from or increased by concussion are a growing concern. In addition to physical symptoms such as dizziness and headache, concussions can result in cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural symptoms, such as mood swings, anxiety, memory issues and depression.

The following strategies to manage mental health challenges during concussion recovery are listed in the *Concussion Awareness Training Tool* e-learning modules:

- Physical activity, see Return to Sport/Return to Activity strategies for step-wise approach
- Deep breathing exercises;
- Identifying and reducing sources of stress;
- Meditation;
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation; and,
- Memory aids

This resource will provide more detail on each strategy. As every concussion is unique, these strategies are not a “one size fits all” approach and a few should be tried to find what works best.

This information is best used when combined with the guidance of a doctor, nurse practitioner, or licensed healthcare professional with relevant training who is experienced in concussion management. When mental health symptoms get to the point of interfering with daily activities or relationships, appropriate care from a medical or licensed healthcare professional with relevant training can help. Additional support from a psychologist, psychiatrist or other mental health professional may be needed.

Physical Activity, as Tolerated:

A period of relative rest is recommended during the first 24-48 hours immediately following a concussion, with limited physical activity. Relative rest is defined as activities of daily living including walking and other symptom-limited physical activities, as tolerated. Light aerobic exercise such as brisk walking, or gentle exertion on an exercise bike, walking in nature, and/or walking a dog could be beneficial.

Deep Breathing Exercises:

Deep breathing exercises can help you calm down when you are feeling stressed, anxious, dizzy, or lightheaded. You can do the exercise standing up, sitting in a chair that supports your back or lying on a bed or yoga mat on the floor. The key is to be as comfortable as you can. If possible, loosen any clothes that may restrict your breathing.

If you're lying down, place your arms slightly away from your sides, palms facing up. Let your legs be straight, or if it is more comfortable for you, bend your knees so your feet are flat on the floor. If you're standing, place your feet about hip-width apart.

Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth, gently and regularly. It may be helpful to count steadily from one to four as you breathe in through your nose, count steadily from one to seven as you hold your breath, and count steadily from one to eight as you exhale through your mouth. Keep doing this for three to five minutes. There are many downloadable computer, tablet, and cell phone applications as well as YouTube videos that can help guide deep breathing exercises.

Identifying and Reducing Sources of Stress:

We all experience stress: daily demands and pressures can be physical, mental, or emotional. The stressful situation is known as *the stressor*, and the symptoms experienced when under stress is known as the *stress response*. Stressors can be both positive and negative: positive stressors are energizing—we are confident that we can complete the necessary tasks, such as planning a wedding or preparing for holidays. Examples of negative stressors include financial issues, divorce or a conflict between job demands and the amount of control one has over meeting those demands. The process of recovering from an injury, such as a concussion, is also a negative stressor. Further, your brain needs more energy to heal when recovering from a concussion and the smaller daily stresses that you dealt with prior to your concussion, both positive and negative, can feel overwhelming.

Noticing when you have physical, emotional, and behavioural stress responses can help identify sources of stress. Physical responses can include muscle aches, increased heart rate, low energy, tight chest or jaw, and dry throat and/or mouth. Emotional responses can include restlessness, agitation, feelings of worthlessness and/or anger, lowered concentration, and lack of motivation. Behavioural responses to stress can include skin picking, nail biting, teeth clenching, foot tapping, seeking reassurance, arguing, increasing substance use, spending money, and decreasing relaxing and fun activities.

The following can help to identify and reduce sources of stress:

- **Overscheduling can cause stress.** Write out all of your daily activities. Prioritize the ones that need to be done by you; for activities or tasks that can be done by others, delegate.
- **Failing to be assertive can cause stress.** Give yourself space and time to heal, and say no to requests you do not have the time or energy for.
- **Procrastination and/or failing to plan ahead can cause stress.** Keep note of what you need to accomplish during the day and week – after prioritizing, break the tasks into smaller steps. Free Pomodoro timers, available online, encourage focusing on a task distraction-free for 25 minutes, followed by a 5-minute break, can help structure time. You can also use the Pomodoro timer method by setting an alarm for 25 minutes followed by an alarm for a 5 minute break.
- **Overwhelming amounts of messages can cause stress.** Even messages from well-meaning friends and family members can feel overwhelming. In today's constantly connected society, the expectation of an immediate response to phone calls, text messages, and emails may be causing stress during your recovery. It can help to limit checking and responding to correspondence to set time frames. Set your voicemail message to indicate that you will respond in a certain time frame on certain weekdays and set a responder for your email services with the same.

Meditation:

There are many different ways to meditate, as well as audiobooks, YouTube videos, and computer, tablet and cell phone applications to guide meditation. HealthLinkBC recommends “mindful meditation” to aid relaxation and relieve stress. The goal is to focus attention on the present moment, making note of what you experience without trying to change it. No special tools or equipment are required.

According to HealthLinkBC:

Getting ready

Choose a time and place where you can meditate without being interrupted. Try to find a quiet place, but don't worry if there are some noises, such as traffic. That kind of noise is just part of the present moment.

When you start, try to meditate for only 10 minutes at a time. Then you can increase the time bit by bit. You can also try meditating for 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the evening.

Before you sit down, remind yourself that you are there to focus on the present moment. This may help keep your mind from wandering. Your daily routine and other distractions will all be waiting for your attention after your meditation session.

The practice

Sit in a comfortable position, either in a chair or on the floor. Or lie down, if that is more comfortable. You can close your eyes, or you can look down, keeping your gaze a few centimetres in front of you on the floor.

As you sit, start to pay attention to your breathing. This is a good way to focus your attention on what is happening right now. Don't try to change your breathing. Just notice how it feels in your lungs and chest.

If your mind wanders, don't worry or feel bad about yourself. Try to notice your thoughts, such as "I wonder what I will need to do at my 10 a.m. work meeting." Then let the thought go, and bring your focus back to the present moment and your breathing. You may do this over and over again during a meditation session. That's okay.

During your meditation, you may feel certain emotions, such as anger, impatience, sadness or happiness. Don't try to hold on to or let go of these feelings. Just notice them. They are part of your experience of the present moment. Keeping your attention on your breathing will help you stay focused and not get lost in the thoughts that your feelings may trigger. For example, if you feel impatient to finish the meditation so you can start the laundry, see if you can focus on the feeling of the impatience rather than thoughts of the laundry. Where do you feel the impatience in your body? Does it feel tight? Does it affect your breathing?

Source: [HealthLinkBC Stress Management: Doing Meditation](#)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation:

Anxiety and stress can cause tense muscles. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) involves intentionally tensing and then relaxing different groups of muscles, one at a time, to relieve that tension. This can also aid in falling asleep. There are YouTube videos online and audiobooks available at your local library or bookstore to help guide PMR if desired.

During PMR, you should be lying comfortably on your back, on the floor or a bed. You can place a pillow under your head and/or the small of your lower back for support. Your arms should be slightly apart from your torso, with palms facing up. Eyes should be closed and the room should be quiet.

Breathe in, and tense the first muscle group (tightly, but not the point of pain or cramping) for 4 to 10 seconds. Breathe out, and completely relax the muscle group all at once (do not relax it gradually). Relax, focusing on breathing deeply in and out, for 10 to 20 seconds before the next muscle group. Notice the difference between how the muscles feel when they are tensed and how they feel when they are relaxed. Practicing the full technique, wherein each muscle group across the entire body is engaged for a short period of time, takes 10-15 minutes. Finish with a few deep breaths and a mental scan of your body to notice any remaining tension.

The following is a list of the muscle groups in order and how to tense them.

- **Feet:** Stretch toes and tense arches.
- **Lower legs:** Point toes towards your face, and then point toes away from face, curling them downward at the same time.
- **Thighs (front):** Squeeze quadriceps muscles (front of thighs) and imagine pulling your kneecaps up towards you with the force of your clenching. Keep legs flat on the floor.
- **Thighs (back):** Clench your hamstring muscles (back of your thighs), with your legs lying flat.
- **Hips and buttocks:** Squeeze buttocks together tightly.
- **Stomach:** Suck it into a tight knot towards your spine.
- **Back:** Bring your shoulder blades together and arch your back up and away from the floor or bed.
- **Hands:** Squeeze into fists, thumbs over fingers.
- **Forearms:** Clench your hands into fists curl them up towards the ceiling.
- **Upper arms:** Clench your hands into fists, bend your arms at the elbows, and flex your bicep muscles (upper arms).
- **Shoulders:** Raise them in a shrug towards your ears.
- **Back of Neck:** Press the back of your head against the floor or bed.
- **Front of Neck:** Touch your chin to your chest, avoiding tension in the back of your neck and/or head).

- **Face:** Contract face as a whole, or focus on separate features one at a time. Eyes close as tightly as possible. Forehead furrows into a deep frown. Nostrils flare and nose scrunches. Lips purse together.

Memory Aids:

Suggestions in the *Concussion Awareness Training Tool* modules and resources to help with memory loss include using a recording device during meetings and phone calls and writing reminders for tasks and appointments. Essentially, memory aids function as external storage for your brain. Even when we are operating at full capacity, it can be difficult to keep track of all the details of our daily lives. The following may be especially helpful when recovering from a concussion:

- **Applications:** Mobile phones, tablets, and computers have many free reminder apps that can be useful to remember important things.
- **Noticeboards:** Putting up a notice board in an obvious spot in your house can help group written reminders together, and be a way for those who live together to communicate.
- **Sticky notes and labels:** Whether it's reminding you where you keep your keys, to put the recycling out when you leave, or the steps to make coffee, sticky notes and labels can help trigger memories in specific places.
- **Calendars and diaries:** Especially when recovering from concussion, it's useful to use a calendar – whether electronic or one fixed on your wall – to keep track of appointments, events, or the daily tasks you've prioritized.
- **GPS route finders:** If you aren't confident finding your way to a new destination, or you are now using a new transit method during your recovery, using a GPS route finder can help.

It is important during recovery to be patient with yourself. Your brain is healing, and mental health symptoms are a normal part of that process for many people who sustain a concussion. If there is no improvement or symptoms are worsening 4 weeks after a concussion, referral to an interdisciplinary clinic by a medical or licensed healthcare professional with relevant training is recommended.

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