

# Arthritis and emotional wellbeing

Arthritis is a chronic health condition that can affect your physical health and your mental wellbeing. It is understandable that the ongoing physical symptoms such as chronic pain, fatigue and disturbed sleep can cause distress and affect your mood.

Anxiety and depression are common in people with arthritis. The good news is that there are effective treatments both for arthritis and for anxiety and depression. With careful management, the symptoms of anxiety and depression can be treated along with those of arthritis so you can live as well as possible.

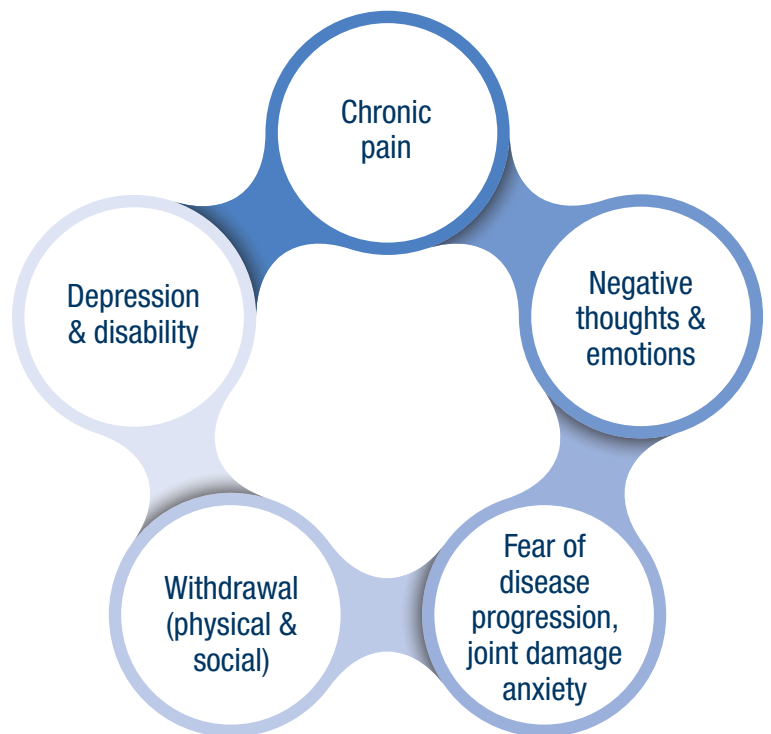
## What is arthritis?

Arthritis is the name for a group of conditions affecting the joints. These conditions cause damage to the joints, typically causing pain and stiffness. There are over 100 forms of arthritis. Some of the most common forms are osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout and ankylosing spondylitis. Each type of arthritis affects the person and their joints in different ways.

## Arthritis and emotions

Many people think that arthritis only affects older people. However that is not true. It can occur at any age including in children and young adults. It is not great news to find out you have a chronic health condition and it is not surprising that people can have negative thoughts and emotions such as a sense of loss or distress. These thoughts and emotions along with decreased participation in enjoyable activities can lead to the development of stress, anxiety and depression (see Figure 1). As a person living with arthritis you need to take care of both your physical health and your mental health and with the right management plan you can live well with arthritis.

**Figure 1: Chronic pain and mental wellbeing**



## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. While stress and anxious feelings are a common response to a situation where we feel under pressure, they usually pass once the stressful situation has passed, or the 'stressor' is removed.

Anxiety is when these anxious feelings don't subside – when they're ongoing and exist without any particular reason or cause. It's a serious condition that makes it hard to cope with daily life. Everyone feels anxious from time to time but, for someone experiencing anxiety, these feelings can't be easily controlled.

Many people with anxiety experience symptoms of more than one type of anxiety disorder and may experience depression as well.

Having arthritis is one of many factors – such as a family history of mental health conditions, stressful life events and personality factors – that may trigger anxiety.

Anxiety is common and the sooner you get help, the sooner you can begin to recover.

### Signs of anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety conditions are sometimes not very obvious as they often develop over time and, given we all experience some anxiety at different points in time, it can be hard to know how much is too much.

Normal anxiety tends to be limited in duration and connected with some stressful situation or event such as a job interview. The type of anxiety experienced by people with an anxiety condition is more frequent or persistent, not always connected to an obvious challenge, and impacts on their quality of life and day-to-day functioning. While each anxiety condition has its own unique features, there are some common symptoms including:

- Physical: panic attacks, hot and cold flushes, racing heart, tightening of the chest, quick breathing, restlessness, or feeling tense, wound up and edgy.
- Psychological: excessive fear, worry, catastrophising, or obsessive thinking.
- Behavioural: avoidance of situations that make you feel anxious which can impact on study, work or social life.

There are effective treatments available for anxiety. For more information on anxiety and treatments visit [www.beyondblue.org.au/anxiety](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/anxiety)

### What is depression?

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time (weeks, months or even years) and sometimes without any apparent reason. Depression

is more than just a low mood – it's a serious condition that has an impact on both physical and emotional wellbeing.

Depression affects how you feel about yourself and makes life more difficult to manage from day-to-day. You may lose interest in work, hobbies and doing things you normally enjoy. You may lack energy, have difficulty sleeping or sleep more than usual, feel anxious or irritable, or find it hard to concentrate.

The encouraging news is that there are a range of treatments, health professionals and services available to help with depression as well as information on how you can help yourself.

### Signs of depression

You may be depressed if you have felt sad, down or miserable most of the time for more than two weeks or have lost interest or pleasure in usual activities and have also experienced some of the signs and symptoms in the list below.

It's important to remember that we all experience some of these symptoms from time to time, and it may not necessarily mean you're depressed. Equally, not everyone who is experiencing depression will have all of these symptoms. The symptoms will not provide a diagnosis – for that you need to see a health professional – but they can be used as a guide.

### Some common symptoms of depression include:

- not going out anymore, loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- withdrawing from close family and friends
- being unable to concentrate and not getting things done at work or school
- feeling overwhelmed, indecisive and lacking in confidence
- increased alcohol and drug use
- loss or change of appetite and significant weight loss or gain
- trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep and being tired during the day
- feeling worthless, helpless and guilty







## Helpful strategies and tips

- Learn about anxiety, depression and arthritis and how these conditions interact.
- Learn how to distinguish the symptoms of arthritis from the symptoms of anxiety or depression
- Plan with your doctor – have a mental health plan.
- Visit your doctor regularly to review your arthritis and mental health management.
- Use your arthritis medicine as prescribed. Talk to your doctor about possible barriers to taking medicine, such as cost, organisation or planning, as well as what to do if your arthritis worsens.
- Get help, support and encouragement from family and friends and have them help you to follow your arthritis and mental health plans.
- Learn relaxation techniques.
- Get involved in social activities.
- Stay active and exercise under the supervision of a doctor.
- Eat healthily and include a wide variety of nutritious foods.
- Limit your substance use (including alcohol, tobacco and coffee).

## How family and friends can help

When a person has arthritis and anxiety or depression, it can affect family and friends. It's important for family

and friends to look after their own health as well as supporting or looking after the person who has arthritis.

- Learn about arthritis, anxiety and depression and their symptoms to help you recognise warning signs.
- Encourage the person to go to the doctor if their arthritis, anxiety or depression gets worse. Make sure you seek help if you think you need it, too.
- Support the person by helping them to follow their arthritis and mental health plans. Gently remind the person to take their arthritis, anxiety and depression medication regularly and to attend all their medical appointments.
- Encourage the person with arthritis to do things that they would normally enjoy.
- Look after your own health by eating well, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and doing things that you enjoy, too.

*This sheet was produced in association with beyondblue.*



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## Remember don't try to go it alone, get some help.

### For more information:

**beyondblue** [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information and advice, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support. Phone 1300 22 4636. Email or chat to us online at [www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](http://www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

**mindhealthconnect** [www.mindhealthconnect.org.au](http://www.mindhealthconnect.org.au) Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.

**SANE Australia:** information about mental health and where to go for support. 1800 187 263 (Monday to Friday 9am-5pm) [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)

**Lifeline:** 24 hour counselling, information and referral. 13 11 14 (local call cost). [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Mensline Australia:** 24 hour telephone support, information and referral for men. 1300 78 99 78 [www.mensline.org.au](http://www.mensline.org.au)

**CRUFAD (Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression):** information about depression, anxiety and its management. [www.crufad.org](http://www.crufad.org)

To find a psychologist, talk to your doctor, contact the Australian Psychological Society on 1800 333 497 or visit [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au)

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Your local Arthritis Office has information, education and support for people with arthritis

**Infoline 1800 011 041 [www.arthritisact.org.au](http://www.arthritisact.org.au)**

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