

Psychological Management of Chronic Health and Medical Problems

Chronic medical problems (cancer, diabetes, asthma, cardiac and renal disorders, chronic pain, dermatology) have become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Managing these medical conditions can have a significant impact on patients' (and their family's/whanau) quality of life and for some patients there are additional psychological effects. This is particularly relevant for patients who have to endure long term, debilitating and demanding treatments.

Patients who also have pre-existing high levels of psychological distress and do not have (or don't perceive they have) a supportive network of family and friends are more vulnerable to the physical and psychological effects of their chronic health condition. Episodes of clinical depression, anxiety or adjustment disorder can occur at quite different time points throughout the course of the illness /disease and can be managed and treated by psychological intervention and therapy.

Psychological distress in chronic health and medical conditions

There are many ways in which psychological distress may affect individuals with a chronic health condition. The most common factors psychologists work with are:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Mood Disorder
- Adjustment Disorder
- Post-traumatic stress (PTSD)
- Grief
- Loss
- Bereavement
- Phobias, eg needle phobia
- Pain
- Disability
- Sexuality
- Psycho-education for specific conditions

Other psychological work

In addition psychologists may work indirectly with other teams, systems and services to provide psychological support, information and advice on psychological management of chronic health conditions:

- Specialist psychological assessments and reports
- Teaching and training
- Clinical Supervision

Self-Management

Many chronic health conditions require people to adopt a self-management approach, to manage their symptoms and lifestyle, to regulate the course and impact of their condition throughout their life. Variation in the patterns of illness and treatments can create uncertainty about optimal management and even prognosis. People may recognize that they need to change how they manage their health but not know how to change.

People can hold a variety of representations (thoughts, feelings and beliefs) about their illness and this plays a major role in adjustment to and management of any chronic condition.

Management of chronic medical problems

Most chronic medical conditions involve managing and utilizing the following aspects of treatment as a foundation:

- Adherence to prescribed medication (or treatments)
- Medical reviews with GP and or specialist services
- Lifestyle changes and adjustments (diet, physical activities, stress management, work)

Psychological Therapy and Intervention

There are several ways that psychologists can help people and their families/ whanau to adjust to and manage chronic health conditions to optimize health and well-being.

Psychological assessment involves active listening to and understanding, the emotional, physical, social and psychological factors impacting on health and wellbeing. The psychologist is able to discuss the treatment and therapy options available, to enable the person to make an informed decision about what suits their individual needs.

Different types of therapy available include:

- Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy CBT
- Mindfulness
- Motivational Interviewing
- Stress management /reduction
- Applied Relaxation
- Exposure based treatments
- Problem Solving
- Emotional Regulation and Distress Tolerance
- Psychodynamic approaches

Psychological Interventions

Psychological therapy for chronic health often includes many of the following interventions in accordance with the type of therapy offered:

- Understanding the chronic health condition or illness (psycho-education)
- Understanding and managing emotions (anxiety, depression, stress, fear, anger, frustration, low mood)
- Understanding and managing factors affecting disability
- Identifying and managing appropriate levels of activity and pacing
- Managing sleep disturbance
- Pain management techniques (distraction, relaxation, pain transformation, acceptance)
- Understanding effects of diet, alcohol, caffeine, exercise
- Supporting effective prescribed medication use and adherence
- Goal setting or identifying values central to the individuals wellbeing
- Re-engagement with family / whanau, friends and social activities
- Resuming participation in work, hobbies interests or meaningful activities
- Addressing interpersonal issues