


Emotional Resilience

Patient Information



Working together for better patient information

A person wearing a grey hoodie is sitting on a wooden bench, seen from behind. They are looking out over a grassy field towards a bright sunset or sunrise. The sky is filled with warm, golden light and some clouds. The overall mood is contemplative and peaceful.

Long-term conditions like chronic kidney disease (CKD) can affect different areas of your life as well as your health. Emotional resilience is about coping with your problems and finding a way to continue to live well, even when under considerable stress.

This leaflet gives an introduction to emotional resilience and provides some tips on how it can help you to cope with the stresses you may experience in your life.

How can emotional resilience help me?

Emotional resilience will not stop you from feeling stressed or experiencing difficult emotions. However it can help you to cope with difficult experiences without letting them become over-whelming.

How can I become more emotionally resilient?

Thinking about who and what matter most to you

Start by asking yourself 'Who are the most important people in my life?' and 'What are the most important values?' What sort of parent / friend / partner / colleague do you want to be? For example, you might realise that being kind, creative, loving and active, is really important to you. These values then act like a beacon to help you make choices about where you invest your time and energy.

When you are diagnosed with a serious condition such as CKD, you can temporarily lose your sense of purpose and direction. Checking in with your values can help you to get back on track and give a sense of meaning to potentially difficult procedures or treatments. They can help you to feel less lost or overwhelmed with the changes that are taking place in your life.

Letting go of struggle

Humans love to be in control. However in terms of emotional resilience it is important to focus your energy on trying to change the things which you can change and practice being more accepting of those that you can't. You cannot change your history or certain aspects of your health, such as having CKD. However you can change how you respond to these things.



Making room for feelings

Living with a condition like CKD can cause lots of negative feelings such as guilt, fear, anxiety, anger, sadness, loneliness and frustration. When difficult feelings like these occur, people are really good at trying to avoid them. For example, you might skip a hospital appointment if it's making you anxious, or drink more than you should if you're feeling frustrated and angry.

These behaviours aren't 'good' or 'bad' in themselves and often they are very successful in reducing difficult emotions – in the short-term. However in the long-term, these things may come at a cost. For example, if you keep avoiding appointments, you may feel less anxious and a bit relieved, but then a few days later, start to worry about things again, or feel guilty for wasting an appointment slot.

So if trying to avoid or control feelings doesn't work in the long term, what do we do with these tricky feelings? In a nutshell, we try to practise being more open and accepting towards them. Take time to consider your feelings and what they may be telling you about what really matters – your values.

Feelings are not harmful in themselves but holding onto them for too long can be a bit like holding tightly onto a rope – it can create rope-burn for your nervous system and your mind. It is therefore important to practice letting them come and go.

The most important tool you have for practising this idea of making room for your feelings is your breath. Think about how the different parts of your body feel as you breathe in and out. Try to slowly start to let go of any resistance or tension in your body, for example around the forehead, jaw, shoulders, hands and chest area.





Unhooking from unhelpful thoughts

Your mind bombards you with thoughts all day long, and sometimes through the night too. This can be exhausting, leaving you feeling disconnected and distracted - being on 'auto-pilot'. Although pleasant thoughts can divert your attention, minds tend to be quite negative and threat focused, as they have evolved over time to zero in on anything which may potentially cause you harm. You cannot stop your mind from doing this, or fully control your thoughts. For example, just try for the next minute, to not think about 'pink elephants'.

It's hard!

We often tell ourselves or others to not think about certain things, which can be exhausting and very difficult to manage for long periods of time. Simply acknowledging that you sometimes get hooked by your thoughts can help. Just because a thought shows up, it doesn't mean that it's true or that you have to act on it.

Being present

Mindfulness can help you to change the way you relate to your thoughts, which can have a big impact on your wellbeing. Start by simply trying to focus on different aspects of your experience.

Stop for a moment. Notice 5 things that you can see. Simply notice them and notice that there's a part of you noticing. Then close your eyes (if it's safe to do so) and notice 5 sounds. Don't worry if you can't find 5, and once again, notice that there's a part of you noticing the sounds. Then keeping your eyes closed, see if you can notice 5 sensations in the body, where it's in contact with something else. Perhaps where your legs are touching a chair, or your trousers are in contact with your skin. Then open your eyes. You have just created a moment of stillness. The thoughts are still there but you have broadened out your field of awareness to include other aspects of your experience.

Weaving these little 'pauses' into your day, can help you to connect more with the present moment. Each time you do this, you are stepping out of your thinking mind and just 'dropping the anchor'. You then create a magical moment of choice and you can move on with your day with a greater sense of awareness of what you're doing. You can decide if you want to persist with what you're doing if it's helping you connect with a value (e.g. sorting out the recycling, or going to the gym), or do something different if you've noticed you're perhaps engaging in something which is less helpful in the long run (e.g. eating unhealthy food, or avoiding something).





Summary

Emotional resilience is about being open to your experiences (even the painful ones), living in the present moment (mindfulness / noticing), and acting on the values which matter most to you. Making an ongoing commitment to practice these things builds resilience and can help you to manage the inevitable struggles of life with a long term health condition.

It is important that you talk to your GP or kidney doctor if you are feeling stressed, anxious or depressed.



Where can I find out more information?

- NHS Choices: Mindfulness: www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness
- MIND: How to manage Stress: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/developing-resilience
- Association for Contextual Behaviour Science: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy - contextualscience.org/act_for_the_public



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