



Staying positive

Having arthritis can make you feel very negative. **Lorna Fray** looks at how to turn those emotions into positivity

How to think positively

- Every day, write down at least one good thing that has happened, no matter how small. It could be a beautiful thing you saw, or something that made you smile. Resist the temptation to write anything negative.
- Try to turn negative thoughts into positive ones. For example, you could switch from thinking 'I have too much to do' to 'I am achieving a lot'.
- Be kind to yourself – try not to 'say' anything to yourself that you would not say to someone else.
- If you are having a bad day, accept that there will be better days.

Feeling angry, frustrated or stressed when you have arthritis is completely understandable, but it is important to tackle negative emotions as they can worsen your symptoms and your quality of life. For example, stress is widely acknowledged to contribute to flare-ups.

The good news is that there are many things you can do to develop a more positive outlook and increase your enjoyment of life.

Why do people with arthritis feel negative?

People with arthritis may experience a wide range of negative emotions, including stress, fear, anger, frustration, anxiety and feeling helpless. Jo Cumming manages Arthritis Care's helplines, which take around 1,000 calls a month. She says that for callers to the helplines, negative emotions are very common.

These emotions can be triggered by pain, fatigue, physical limitations, changes in physical appearance, social isolation and financial concerns, among other things. Misgivings about your medication, and the side effects of medication, can also be a cause of negative emotions. 'Mobility issues, the fear of getting worse and the extreme uncertainty associated with arthritis can make people fearful and concerned,' explains Jo. 'For example, people with arthritis may worry about the future or be frightened of their symptoms getting worse.' Read Arthritis Care's *Coping with Emotions* booklet, which looks at these emotions in detail at www.arthritiscare.org.uk/Booklets

Claire Lee from Leamington Spa is 25-years-old and has psoriatic arthritis.

She finds medical appointments an emotional strain, because they bring problems to the fore: 'Only if I've been to an appointment do I find having arthritis really negative. Recently a couple of times I've got upset by the reality of it.'



Photograph by Tessa Newmark

Arthritis can trigger a wide range of negative emotions

I went to the loos and had a cry.'

The fluctuating nature of arthritis can be upsetting for many people. 'I can never predict how I'm going to be from day to day,' says 54-year-old Rory Adams from London, who has fibromyalgia and seronegative spondyloarthropathy. 'I can't make plans. It's frustrating, and there's a difficulty coping with other people's frustrations as well.' For example, Rory recently had to miss a planned local council meeting because of a flare-up, and the person he was supposed to meet was not very sympathetic.

A positive outlook

Both Claire and Rory have taken steps to manage their emotions and improve their lives. 'There's always something people can do to help themselves,' asserts Jo.

If you are feeling negative, the first step is to ask yourself why, and what you can do about it. Research studies suggest that the best ways to overcome negative emotions are to take control of your situation, live an active life, have a good social network and adopt a positive outlook.

'The best medicine is a positive mental attitude – you can

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overcome anything if you have that,' says Alex Dickens, who has rheumatoid arthritis (RA). 'I look at the good things in life, the things I can do, not the things I can't.'

Jonathan Gledhill has seronegative RA. He takes on physical challenges and enjoys the sense of achievement. Rory finds it helpful to get a sense of perspective by meeting people who experience similar difficulties.

The attitudes of others helps Claire remain upbeat: 'My partner doesn't do negative at all.' She recalls continuing acupuncture sessions even though they made her arthritis worse because she gained a lot from the therapist's positive attitude.

Take control

You can't change the fact that you have arthritis, but there are ways to minimise your symptoms and improve your enjoyment of life.

Finding out more about your condition can ease anxieties and help you understand your options. Jonathan remembers: 'When I first got my medication I had a leaflet from the doctor but wanted to read more.' He searches for information online and reads scientific journals, but cautions against taking online information at face value: 'You see horror stories. On forums especially, some people copy information without giving the context.' Claire, who is a

ALEX DICKENS

Alex, 52, is an artist who lives in Cornwall. She has RA.

'My [paintings] reflect the person I am inside. They're bold, colourful and cheerful.

My husband has been a great support but I've always been self-reliant. There was a long time when I thought I'd never be able to work again. Emotionally, that was incredibly difficult to deal with. Slowly but surely you manage to talk yourself round. I get on with things. I've recently rediscovered my love of writing.

Medication played a huge part in becoming more positive. Before, I was basically bedridden. They put me on adalimumab (Humira) eventually. It changed the way I looked at life.

I've found ways to remain independent. Access to Work has been very helpful. I've employed somebody to run the gallery, so my work has halved. I've also started painting smaller pictures so I can do them sitting down.

You're going to have off days and good days. Pacing is the key – just knowing when you're tired and stopping. I'm not very good at doing it, but you've got to learn when to just sit down and watch TV.'

biology teacher, says: 'I usually try not to read anything because I understand all the journals. I'd rather be a bit naïve. It can be so intense.'

As well as publishing information online and in booklets, Arthritis Care runs free self-management programmes that can help people to experience less pain, become more active and meet others in a similar situation. See www.arthritiscare.org.uk/Courses

Taking the right medication has transformed the lives of Jonathan, Claire, Rory and Alex. Rory explains: 'In the past I would get very depressed. I don't any more

because of the medication I take. It doesn't take away the pain and frustration, but it enables those emotions to wash over me.' On Rory's previous medication, the side effects were worse than his symptoms.

Finding the right medication can take time. If your medication is not working, see your doctor. If they will not listen, try keeping a diary of your symptoms. This can be a relief in itself, as well as a useful reference tool. You could also request a referral to a local pain clinic, for support and advice.

'Your relationship with health professionals is so important,' says Claire. Both she and Alex have changed specialists in the past. 'I didn't like the way I was being fobbed off,' explains Alex. Both women also recommend being assertive with healthcare professionals to get what you need.

An active life

Many lifestyle choices can help you to remain positive, even in challenging circumstances. 'Exercise is great. It makes you feel better, it strengthens muscles that weaken through arthritis, and gets endorphins going,' says Jo. Jonathan agrees: 'It's good to reduce inflammation, and losing weight reduces pressure on your joints.' Claire says: 'I learned that I definitely have to keep moving.'

If you want to try something new, see your physiotherapist first, to discuss what is safe. The important thing is keeping active, whether that is gentle swimming or walking the dog.

A positive lifestyle is not all about hard work. 'It's important to have a laugh – go and do something you enjoy,' says Jo. Research studies have demonstrated that seeing friends and family can make people feel better, physically and emotionally. Some people find faith a source of solace ➔ p25

Photograph by Tessa Newmark



Learning about your condition can be empowering

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and social interaction. Although it is natural to want to hide away sometimes, Jo emphasises that negative emotions 'are compounded by isolation'.

Many people give up their hobbies when they are diagnosed with arthritis, but keeping yourself busy is another positive step you can take. Hobbies can distract you from discomfort and build your self-confidence, which has been shown to make people more resilient in challenging situations. Having goals, planning something to look forward to and helping others all have a positive impact on people's emotional well-being.

'Do try to find diversionary activities,' recommends Rory, who is currently out of work, 'I'm the chair of my local disabled group.'

Take time out

One aspect of managing your arthritis is learning to prioritise. Sometimes you need a break. 'I'm a great one for relaxing. I love talking books – they are really low effort,' says Alex. Even on busy days, you should be able to spare a few minutes to relax. You could try the relaxation exercises in the box to help clear your mind.

Treat yourself occasionally. 'You may be watching your weight, but have a cream cake once in a while and really enjoy it,' suggests Jo.

Finding support

We all benefit from the emotional and practical support of others. There is lots of evidence that discussing feelings is beneficial. Friends and family can be a great support, but sometimes you may want to talk to people who understand what you are going



Photograph by Tessa Newmark

Support groups and talking to others with arthritis can be a positive experience

through. Being a member of a disability group works well for Rory. There are no support groups near Alex but she says: 'If there was one, I'm not sure I'd go. It can drag you down.' Online discussion forums – like Arthritis Care's – can be supportive, but bear in mind that some members can be more constructive than others.


Friends and family are an invaluable source of practical support and encouragement. Jonathan's girlfriend went on a diet with him, which made it easier for him to lose weight and keep it off. Claire acknowledges: 'I don't think I could live on my own now. My partner does a lot in the house.'

Sometimes, you may need expert help. Arthritis Care's helplines are staffed by professional counsellors who can help you or signpost you to other sources of support

(Call 0808 800 4050 10am–4pm weekdays or email Helplines@arthritiscare.org.uk).

Jo says: 'Just picking up the phone and seeking help is a positive step'. If you need emotional support in the evening, Jo recommends contacting Samaritans (call 08457 90 90 90 or visit www.samaritans.org).

If your negative emotions last for more than a month or have an extreme effect on your life, seek professional help. Your GP can refer you for free counselling or other specialist services. Rory suggests: 'Press for a referral to a psychiatrist who knows about the effects of chronic pain.'

Feeling negative about your arthritis is completely natural but can be draining – think about using that energy to take some positive steps to manage your condition well. 

JONATHAN GLEDHILL

Jonathan, 31, has seronegative RA. He works in IT and lives just outside Glasgow.

'The first couple of years were tough. I had to give up rugby and skiing, and I put on quite a lot of weight.

Waiting for the diagnosis was tough. I was frustrated and worried. I became quite inactive and down in the dumps. Things improved a bit once I was diagnosed. It took a while for the medication to work, though the pain decreased.

About a year ago I wanted to change things. I did some reading online and bought an exercise machine. I started sleeping better, and feeling better. So I bought a bike and started to cycle to work a few days a week.

There are some days you don't feel up to it, but I try to do 10 minutes on the machine. Getting fitter and healthier does make a difference. I actually went skiing last year. You can put your life on hold with arthritis but you have to do what works for you. I have read stuff about avoiding too much protein and red meat, but I couldn't give up eating meat.

Family and friends and have been incredibly supportive. And my co-workers are better, now they understand more.'

Relaxation exercises

Make yourself as comfortable as possible. Breathe deeply and slowly, in through your nose and out through your mouth. Don't hold your breath or force it – let it come naturally in a regular rhythm.

Lie down in a quiet and comfortable place. Close your eyes and breathe deeply. Moving down your body, stretch each muscle group for a few seconds and then relax them completely before moving to the next muscles. If you have difficulty with certain muscles, focus on relaxing other parts of your body. Afterwards, remain still for a few minutes until you feel ready to get up.