



WRIISC

## War Related Illness and Injury Study Center

Health Outcomes Military Exposures

Department of Veterans Affairs

# EMPOWERING YOU FOR BETTER HEALTH

A RESOURCE FOR VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

## SETTING THE STAGE

A Veteran with chronic symptoms who came to the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) for evaluation remarked,

“ I wish I had fractured my arm. It would be so much easier. It would be painful when it happens but then they would put a cast on it and it would be better in a few weeks. But it seems like I’ve been dealing with the same medical problems for so long and there is no sure fire or quick solution for me!”

This same sentiment is often true of Veterans who are dealing with chronic or persistent long-term symptoms including pain, fatigue (tiredness), and headaches. When symptoms can reoccur and there is no clear cure, it is easy to begin to feel hopeless. Unfortunately, this can also lead to avoiding or stopping the very behaviors that are good for your health. Take charge. Even if there is no known “sure fire” (or definite) cure for your symptoms, there are things that you can do to change negative thought patterns, behave differently and improve how you feel and function day to day.

## ACCEPTANCE IS KEY

Dealing with chronic symptoms is stressful. It can cause changes in how you live your life and how you function

day to day (for example, it can impact how much of your usual daily activities you are able to accomplish). It can become a vicious cycle, with physical symptoms making stress or feelings of being down in the dumps worse, which in turn can make your physical symptoms worse.

Tackling this debilitating issue begins with having a healthy level of acceptance of your symptoms. Acceptance means understanding that there are some things not in your control. However, you can learn to focus on what you can change (versus what you cannot) and work towards living the best life possible.

**Steps toward acceptance... D.R.A.I.N.** harmful ways of thinking and create a new way to view and participate in your health for a better quality of life.

- **D**etermine what is important and in your control to change
- **R**e-Focus your energy on those aspects of your situation over which you can change or control
- **A**cept what you have determined cannot be changed
- **I**ntroduce healthy ways of dealing with challenges in your life
- **N**o longer engage in efforts to control what you cannot change
- **DRAIN** the harmful ways of thinking and create a new way to view and participate in your health for a better quality of life.

Healthy and peaceful acceptance of unpleasant realities is one of the most important things that one can do mentally to reduce stress and maintain peace of mind. Remember that acceptance is not a one-time decision, rather, it is an ongoing process which may need to be re-experienced every day.





### WHAT IS SELF-MANAGEMENT?

Self-management is the term used to describe what you can do yourself to improve your overall health once you accept chronic symptoms as part of your life.

*Some self-management strategies might include:*

- **MAKING YOUR VISITS WITH HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS COUNT**– You are the chief person who controls your health care. It’s important that treatment decisions with providers are made with you, based on goals that are important to you. Ask questions so that you understand why you are taking a medicine or doing a treatment, keep follow-up appointments, and talk about what is working and not working in your treatment plan. You and your providers can then problem solve to fit the treatment into your life and fix problems that arise.
- **MIND-BODY CONNECTIONS**– Think about things that can help you to relax and not focus on the stress that your symptoms could cause- for example taking a warm shower or talking with a certain friend or loved one - and then make these things part of your life on a regular basis. Find out what’s available in your community or within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) that might help- yoga classes, meditation, or a therapist who can teach relaxation techniques are just some ideas. (See our fact sheet on mind-body connection for a detailed explanation.)

- **FITNESS AND FEELING GOOD**– Aerobic or cardiovascular exercise triggers body responses that can improve sleep and wellbeing, both physical and mental. It has also been shown to improve symptoms such as pain and fatigue. Be sure to start small and build up to 30 minutes a day (graded exercise). Always consult with your doctor before starting an exercise program. You may want to consider talking to your health care provider about a referral to physical therapy to help you develop a workable graded exercise plan and to touch base with your physical therapist periodically to tweak it.
- **EATING FOR HEALTH**– When people don’t feel good, nutrition can fall by the wayside. For most people, it is important to eat three or more times a day, with each meal/snack containing some protein. Eating meals/snacks spaced throughout the day can help you avoid highs and lows in blood glucose, and other body chemicals, that can contribute to headaches, tiredness, and body aches. Eating a nutritionally balanced diet can help avoid vitamin and other nutritional deficiencies that can contribute to body pains or other problems. Work on eating a healthy diet, and consider getting a referral to a Nutritionist to help you improve your diet, or to meet special needs. Both [www.MayoClinic.com](http://www.MayoClinic.com) and [www.FamilyDoctor.org](http://www.FamilyDoctor.org) have information on health nutrition basics.

### LIVING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Setting new goals and changing activity levels should reflect a healthy lifestyle balance. By lifestyle balance, what is meant is the balancing of duties and responsibilities on the one hand, and things you do for fun and enjoyment on the other. It’s important to avoid the extremes of underactivity and overactivity. Watch out for the overactivity –which can lead to a “crash and burn” cycle. Discover an activity balance that is right for you. Pacing yourself is probably the most important thing you can do to find the right activity balance for you.

**REMEMBER: DO NOT GIVE UP EASILY AND KEEP IN MIND THAT DEVELOPING A NEW WAY OF THINKING AND A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE TAKES TIME AND PATIENCE.**

