Managing Depression With Atrial Fibrillation

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Living Better with AFib

Searching around online, you have undoubtedly encountered your fair share of information related to physical health and mental health. From this information, you know that when physical health issues strike, mental health issues are sure to follow.

Depression and anxiety run rampant in someone that is left reeling from their new diagnosis. Treatment for the physical symptoms can make psychological symptoms worse, and mental health symptoms can trigger even more physical symptoms. Understanding and managing the balance is incredible important.

When the doctor gave you the atrial fibrillation (AFib) diagnosis, you decided to read up on all you could to ensure that your mental health wouldn't be harmed by your physical health. That decision led you here, but the data available might surprise you – the link between an AFib diagnosis and increased mental health issues is quite poor. In fact, there is little evidence to associate AFib to any mental health disorder in particular. This means that AFib is an oddity in the world of mental health influenced by chronic medical conditions.

Having AFib, this truth puts you in a very interesting situation. You have choices. On the one hand, you could take a defensive/reactionary approach. You could sit and wait as you hope depression and anxiety never become part of your life. On the other hand, you could take an offensive/preventative approach, were you invest a larger portion of your time and energy attacking mental health issues before they have an opportunity to target you.

Since you are still reading, it seems you have chosen the preventative path. Good choice.

Grieving AFib

Like AFib, grief is a bit of an anomaly. Grief is not depression or anxiety, though it has elements of each. Grief is also different because it is not technically a mental illness, but it is something that can leave a drastically negative impression on your mental health.

Grieving and mourning are necessary in situations where a loss occurs. Receiving your AFib diagnosis is not a death, but it is the loss of a functioning level that you previously enjoyed. It is a downgraded view of the future. Processing this subtraction will be an addition to quality of life. Here's how:

- **Move through denial –** AFib symptoms can present differently for different people. It can take time before symptoms are clearly understood and identified as professionals may questions other aspects of your physical and mental health initially. This is a breeding ground for denial. Work through denial by acknowledging the current state of your physical health and what you are feeling. Talk openly about it with others to cement it as fact.
- **Move through anger –** When denial is addressed, anger is a likely reaction. Forget the flawed notion that anger is bad or unwanted. Anger has a bad reputation because people tend to suppress their feelings for

too long leading to an explosive burst of anger later where feelings are hurt and relationships broken. Find new ways to channel the feeling into productive actions. You may have good luck releasing anger through art, journaling or breaking things. Finding an outlet for anger is another step towards acceptance.

- **Move through sadness –** A loss is sad. When a new condition enters your life, a number of thoughts are experienced. Write down your thoughts that contribute to depression. Are you worried about the future? Does the thought of AFib equate to death? Are you worried that you will miss important milestones in the lives of your family members? Debate and challenge these thoughts to arrive at conclusions that make sense and will add to happiness.
- **Move through bargaining –** Bargaining is all about making a deal. You try to bargain with family members and yourself but usually with God, in an attempt to remove the stress from your life. You tell God that you will be the best Christian if only He will allows you to live longer or be symptom-free. Bargaining is an attempt to take control over something that is fully out of your hands. Once you realize the limits of your control, you can move to the next step.
- **Move to acceptance –** You must accept the things you cannot change. You *cannot* make AFib go away. You *can* alleviate symptoms by following doctor's orders and recommendations. Acceptance is not only acknowledging the diagnosis, but also in understanding the widespread influence it has on your life now and will in the future. Another part of acceptance is putting time, energy and effort into what you can control. If you feel that you have found some level of acceptance, refocus on self-care.

Next page: tips for maintaining your mental health.

Improving Well-Being

You want to be preventive and proactive, but you may need some guidance on getting started. The tips below are some of the best ways to improve your mental health and overall well-being.

- **Exercise –** The physical health benefits of exercise are too many to name. The mental health benefits are notable, while being overshadowed at times. Beginning a simple walking program provides similar value as antidepressant medications and improves current mood and anxiety symptoms. If symptoms are low, exercise will create a buffer protecting you from future stressors. Experiment with weight training, stretches and household chores to expand your definition of exercise. With this, be sure to consult your doctor to gain a clear understanding of the behaviors that are encouraged and those that should be limited.
- **Diet –** To have your mental and physical health performing at optimal levels you need to consume nutritious foods. There is no way around it: what you eat influences how you feel. Take a serious look at your diet and determine changes worth making. Take foods and drinks into consideration as well as times of day that you eat. Food is energy. Use it throughout the day. The good news is that diets appropriate for AFib are the same diets that are best for overall well-being. Eating more fish, less salt and less cholesterol will lead you to feel happier and more energetic.
- **Mental stimulation –** People need various types of stimulation to maintain their mental health. Think about the huge boost it was learning to ride a bike or tie your shows for the first time. Think about the sense of accomplishment when you repaired that leaky sink. Trying new experiences with new people is a great way to receive mental stimulation. Learning new things and attempting word and number puzzles builds new pathways in your brain. Schedule time daily to challenge your mind and break out of old routines and ruts.

- **Sleep –** Sleep is so simple and so easily taken for granted. Get in a routine and work to extend sleep until you are getting 8-9 hours of restful sleep each night. Shift eating and exercise times to find the desired effect. If it is challenging for you to choose sleep over other activities, take a long look at your energy levels in the morning and throughout the day. Trading a TV show for 30 minutes of sleep might be the best deal you will make. After all, that's what DVRs are for.
- **Socialization –** People, especially as they get older, have fewer social relationships. This is troubling since love and feelings of belongingness are crucial for happiness at any stage of life. If your supports

have diminished, seek out new ones. Try a new club or community group. Volunteer at the local animal shelter or take a class. The type of socialization you engage is not as important as the socialization itself since this will improve socialization and mental stimulation at once.

- **Relax –** Stress is sneaky. Just when you think you have everything well managed, stress can present. Because of this, finding and perfecting stress management techniques is an ongoing process. Work to find a balance between distraction, avoidance and resolution of stresses. Relaxation techniques exist in numerous shapes and sizes. Find ones that work for you. Your heart will thank you.

Conclusion

It is true that AFib might not adversely influence your mental health to the degree of other chronic medical conditions, but it still deserves attention. Be sure to work towards acceptance of your diagnosis to avoid future problems. Along the way, work to improve your overall well-being. Your mental health and physical health will only improve. You have no idea how good you can feel.