AFib and Emotional Health

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Your body is a complex arrangement of interrelated systems and structures. Take your heart for example. Your heart pumps oxygenated blood through a long stretch of blood vessels, supplying your organs and muscles with fuel, and then returns the blood back to the heart to restart the process. Something that you take for granted sustains your life.

With the range of challenging tasks your body is responsible for, it is no surprise that some of these operations become disrupted. Your atrial fibrillation (AFib) signifies a slight break down of functioning. Your heart's electrical signals become irregular and abnormal. These signals cause your heart to beat too quickly, too slowly or in a pattern without rhythm.

The results of AFib are both direct and indirect. You are directly affected by AFib in the form of increased risk of stroke, blood clots, heart failure, and other heart-related complications. The indirect impact comes in the form of the psychological and emotional distress as people with AFib are at risk for depression and anxiety.

To achieve the lifestyle that you seek, you must treat the physical and the emotional. You must treat the direct and the indirect. Deciding to treat only a single aspect of the illness will leave you incomplete.

Gaining education and awareness of AFib and AFib-related emotional health concerns will give you the information needed to seek out the appropriate level of prevention and intervention. This combination will give you the best opportunity for a happy life.

Triggers of AFib

Lessening the emotional influence of AFib is much easier when you are able to lessen the physical symptoms. Identifying and reducing your triggers of AFib is one of the best decisions that you can make. What triggers your AFib? Included here is a general list that covers a range of triggers, and perhaps, ones that you have not considered:

- **Fatigue** – Whenever your body is not performing to the best of its ability, it is at greater risk for AFib. Being tired, physically ill or recovering from a recent surgery are proven to increase the prevalence of AFib.
- **Dehydration** – Following in line with the above, anytime your body is not at optimal level, you are greater risk. When dehydrated, you are not performing at your best. Be aware and attentive to your water intake as well as your output. Certain foods and drinks can work to dehydrate you without your awareness. Reducing caffeine and alcohol will help you stay hydrated and healthy.

- **Exercise** – Exercise is always good, right? Well, not always. Some people report that exercise actually triggers an AFib event while other report that exercise is beneficial overall.

- **Hormones** – Woman have a normal changing and shifting in hormones with menstruation. The movement is natural but also problematic in terms of AFib. Woman report an increase of events in relation to their period.
- **Medications** – Have you been trying to beat a cold? Have you had nasal congestion without relief? Before you reach for an over-the-counter medication for treatment, check with your doctor about possible interactions with AFib. Cold medication and nasal sprays commonly trigger issues.
- **Stress** – You already know that any physical impairment will increase your AFib risk and the same is true with mental impairments. Stress imparts a large physical impact on your body, which can trigger an AFib event.

Next page: the link between AFib and anxiety, and how to manage it.

AFib and Anxiety

The relationship between AFib and anxiety is particularly interesting. Since racing heart, increased pulse rate and tightness in the chest are common symptoms of both AFib and anxiety, there is some confusion about what is triggering the symptoms. To make matters more confusing, AFib can feel like anxiety and anxiety can feel like AFib while AFib can trigger anxiety and anxiety can trigger AFib.

Certainly, there is a strong difference between the two and treatments will not always overlap. Because of this, you must work to increase your understanding of each to differentiate between the two. Only in doing this will you be able improve your emotional state. Want to feel better with AFib and anxiety? Here's how:

- **Differentiate** - Thoughts, feelings, emotions, behaviors and physical sensations can trigger anxiety and panic. Anxiety symptoms increases when your body misinterprets AFib symptoms for anxiety. Your body thinks that you are in danger and your mind responds in kind. Learning to identify symptoms of AFib accurately and differentiating them from anxiety is helpful. What does anxiety feel like? What does panic feel like? What does AFib feel like? Consider the differences and make lists to clarify them.
- **Self-monitor** - Pay more attention to your body and your mind. What are thinking? What does your body feel like? Noticing changes and new sensations while they are small gives you more power to react and reduce your symptoms. If left to build, your thoughts can become more negative and anxious. Check for trends in your symptoms. Does anxiety come later in the day? Does AFib remain unpredictable and unexpected? Understanding the trends will send your thoughts in the best direction when symptoms occur.
- **Discomfort or danger** – When dealing with anxiety and panic, therapists often discuss the idea of "discomfort, not danger" when referring to the notion that anxiety cannot hurt you. Anxiety works by making you think that something terrible is going to happen. After a panic attack, people report thinking that they were having a heart attack, a stroke or that they were going to stop breathing. Anxiety is scary but anxiety is only anxiety. With AFib, the issue becomes discomfort or danger as AFib can lead to repercussions that are more serious.

Treating the Anxiety to Treat AFib

You have already gained awareness of your AFib triggers and you are working to differentiate between anxiety and AFib. Now, you mission is to add as much relaxation to your life. Here's how:

- **Relaxation techniques** – So many relaxation techniques are available to you. Explore and experiment with a variety to find the benefit you are seeking. Maybe you have tried deep breathing, but have you tried progressive muscle relaxation, autogenic training or guided imagery? Too many people are too easily deterred by early frustrations with relaxation. Like anything else, relaxation takes practice to gain benefit and longer to perfect. With the proven track record of relaxation techniques, there is no reason to not try. These are pure benefit with no risk.
- **Exercise** – In some cases, exercise can worsen AFib, but this should not keep you from trying. There are many types of exercises from aerobic to anaerobic, from yoga to weight training and from swimming to

Pilates. Finding one that benefits you is possible with some level of trial and error.

- **Understand the trick** – Anxiety tells you helpful activities actually make anxiety worse. This is the trick. Some people, unwisely, choose to avoid anything that may trigger an event. They live life in their “comfort zone” to stay safe. This idea sounds promising until you realize that, over time, your comfort zone shrinks. What used to be comfortable is now impossible and your life is more limited and unfulfilling.
- **Pleasurable experiences** – Don’t head to the couch is search of relaxation. Watching a show or catching up on your social media is fine in small doses but too much does not reduce your anxiety. Instead, choose to seek out positive experiences. Go places you want to go and do enjoyable things. Never pass up an opportunity to have fun. Make fun your focus. Anxiety will try to convince you that there is risk outside. Don’t listen.
- **Socialize** – Having a chronic medical condition has a way of breeding shame, guilt and self-doubt. The best way to remedy this situation is with increased socialization. Your friends and family care about you and want to know that you are well. Make plans for dinner, a picnic or a basketball game to discuss your condition and your feelings about it. Always use assertive communication to balance your needs with theirs. Being a good friend means being available and vulnerable equally.

Conclusion

AFib is a powerful foe and something that is often feared. Understand that the fear and apprehension you feel only triggers more AFib. Working to understanding triggers, differentiating between anxiety and AFib and treating the anxiety directly will leave you in a better position to improve your state. Remember, as stress goes down so does AFib.