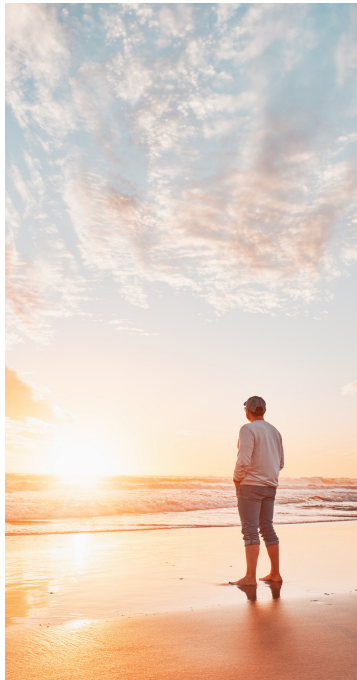


Take Fainting to Heart
There is no such thing as a simple faint...

Mindfulness and Healthy Living with Syncope



Working together to improve the diagnosis, treatment and
quality of life for all those affected by syncope

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Glossary

Arrhythmia Irregular or abnormal heartbeat which may be excessively fast or slow

Body Scanning A type of meditation in which a person focuses on or scans parts of the body

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) A type of talking therapy which aims to improve mental health and reduce anxiety

Mindfulness A branch of meditation bringing focus into the present moment

Physiology The way in which a part of the body functions

Psychological A term used to describe a condition relating to or arising from the mind or emotions (brain)

Syncope A medical term for a blackout that is caused by a sudden lack of blood supply to the brain

Reflex Syncope One of the most common forms of syncope

Yoga A physical, mental and spiritual practice. The word itself meaning 'union' or 'connection'

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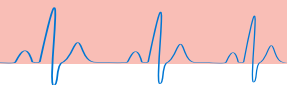
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Everyone experiences stress in life and sometimes this can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression. The medical community are increasingly beginning to understand that living with any long-term medical condition will add stress and worry. There are a number of therapies which can help to reduce stress and teach us how to manage stress and worry. In this booklet, we want to give you a flavour of the therapies which can help, and explain how the therapy addresses issues to help support you in living with your condition.

Alternative therapies

Far from being 'faddy' or 'new age', steps to promote emotional wellbeing can complement the more 'visible' forms of treatments prescribed by clinicians in the form of drugs. They can have a significant role to play in finding a holistic answer.

While research into some complementary therapies is inconclusive, some STARS members have talked about the benefits they have received from yoga, acupuncture and mindfulness.

Some people have claimed that acupuncture can alleviate headaches, decrease pulse rate and is associated with a lower incidence of arrhythmia episodes.

The benefits of yoga for syncope

What is yoga?

Yoga is a traditional Hindu discipline including physical, mental and spiritual practices, which helps to integrate the mind, body and soul, and also improves physical health. There are many different types of yoga, but all focus on three main aspects: breathing, posture and meditation. Yoga is widely practised for health and relaxation purposes. It can help with physical aspects such as strength, flexibility and even weight loss, but it is also very powerful in helping with stress reduction, relaxation and focusing the mind on the present.



Why is yoga good for me?

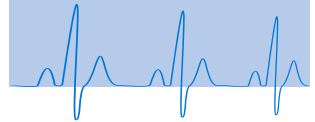
It is said that heart rate is controlled by both the heart and the brain. Yoga is a practice which connects the heart and the brain, creating a perfect balance between the body and mind. It is widely recognized that yoga can reduce anxiety and stress. It is also suggested that it can improve cardiovascular function by decreasing the heart rate and blood pressure, and can increase blood flow in the body. Regularly practising yoga can be a way of helping to relieve stress and anxiety, thereby helping you to cope with your condition. Yoga can help provide a powerful connection between the mind and the body, which can be very helpful for those with an arrhythmia.

As well as the physical effects and symptoms of syncope and PoTS, a lot of people struggle with anxiety, stress and depression. There is almost always a psychological adjustment following a diagnosis of syncope or PoTS, and unfortunately for many people, these thoughts and feelings can become overwhelming or difficult to overcome. Anxiety and stress can increase the heart rate, and increase the frequency and severity of episodes. It is accepted that yoga can dramatically reduce anxiety and stress, and in turn can help with managing your condition.

For people with low blood pressure, it is important to make sure you breathe properly and drink plenty of water while doing yoga. Be careful of making any sudden movements, as this could cause dizziness or fainting.

"I am beginning to realise that being aware of how you are feeling and being honest about these emotions is an important step."

Patricia, aged 24



Mindfulness

With modern life becoming increasingly busy, it is easy to stop noticing things around you, or how you might be feeling. This can lead to your emotions getting on top of you. Living with an arrhythmia can breed anxiety and worry, which can revolve around focusing heavily on the physical symptoms and fear that can be associated with these.

Mindfulness is a branch of meditation that has grown in popularity over the years, which involves concentrating on the senses.

Mindfulness is defined as 'paying attention to what is happening in the present moment (in the mind, body and external environment) with an attitude of curiosity and kindness'. It is often used as a therapeutic technique and has been found to alleviate symptoms of a variety of mental and physical disorders in a physical study.

Practicing mindfulness meditation in your day-to-day life can allow you to respond calmly to symptoms of an arrhythmia when they arise, as it teaches you how to be aware of physical sensations in the body, without becoming overwhelmed by them. This technique can also help to prevent you from slipping into unhelpful and negative thinking patterns. Alleviating stress and worry in this way can support a reduction in the severity and frequency of arrhythmia episodes.

As well as reducing anxiety levels, mindfulness can lower your blood pressure, heart rate and increase your immune function.

Why not have a go?

Find a quiet and calm place to sit. The point of mindfulness is to be aware of the experiences you are having through your senses in the present moment. Try to focus on your breathing, paying attention to the physical sensation. It is easy for your mind to wander in thought but try to keep bringing it back to the present and the here and now. It is normal for thoughts to constantly flow through your mind but try to let them pass like rolling clouds. Close your eyes and try to concentrate on what you can smell, feel and hear right now.

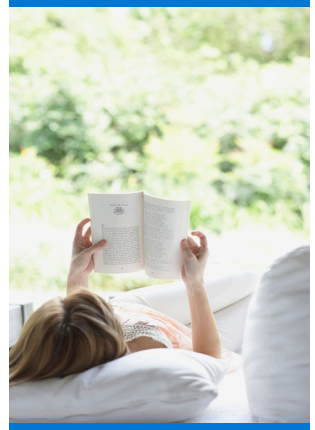
Relaxation

In a world that is becoming increasingly fast paced and stressful, it has become more important than ever to be able to offer yourself some time to relax. Relaxation can help to combat stress, anxiety and worrying, by releasing physical and mental tension. It is also very beneficial to your mental health and well-being, helps you sleep better and improve your mood.

Stress can overwhelm your body, which in turn releases chemicals preparing your body for a 'fight or flight' response, even when it is not necessary. If you are a person who experiences stress on a daily basis, this can have a big impact on your body and physical health.

For some people, the thought of fitting relaxation into daily life may seem like you just do not have the time. However, it can take as little as five minutes per day to help reset your mind and outlook, and ease away the feeling of stress and anxiety.

Some relaxation tips include listening to music, lighting a candle or some incense, having a massage, deep breathing, going for a walk, dancing, reading a book or simply talking to a friend or settling down to watch a movie. Deep breathing is a simple but very helpful relaxation technique, that can be done anywhere at any time.



Body Scanning

Body scanning is a well-known type of meditation or mindfulness that can be very beneficial for people with many different medical conditions, including syncope or PoTS. It is a method that is used for drawing attention to specific parts of the body, focusing on the sensations you may be experiencing as you work through the body. The aim of body scanning, is to notice and be aware of how each part of the body feels, without trying to change anything, or labelling any sensation as 'good' or 'bad'. Trying body scanning is a great way of learning to live with your condition, and learning that you can lead a happy and healthy life alongside it.



To begin, find a comfortable place to lay down either on a bed or the floor, making sure it is calm and quiet. Closing your eyes may help you to focus. Allowing yourself as much time as you need for this, take some deep breaths in and out. You can start from your toes or the top of your head, working your way up or down the body, moving over each part of the body as you go. You may notice sensations, such as tingling, pressure, tightness, or nothing at all. If you notice your mind wandering, do not worry, just notice that this is happening, and then gently bring back your attention.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a psychological approach whose effectiveness has been most clearly established in research trials, and for this reason it is recommended as the treatment of choice by patients for a wide range of physical health conditions. Some more recent variants of CBT, especially those which incorporate ideas of mindfulness and acceptance are increasingly being advocated. More traditionally associated with eastern philosophies, these have been demonstrated to have a direct impact on our physiology, as well as patient-reported quality of life.

Syncope can impose a considerable impact on an individual's quality of life. People with syncope report significant levels of psychological distress about intrusive and disabling symptoms (fatigue, breathlessness, nausea, palpitations, pre-syncope), losses and changes in roles (work, health, activities) and challenges to independence (relationships, mobility and sense of self). Many people with syncope experience troubling anxiety with worry and fear associated with their symptoms, some report panic and others experience depression. Whilst some people seem to push on in spite of this, others find it a frustrating and disabling condition. Furthermore, psychological distress has been found to have an effect on response to medical treatment and advice – people who are more distressed tend to respond less well to treatment.

CBT can be very effective in helping to address anxiety and depression related to various conditions. This talking therapy can help you understand the things that trigger and contribute to your experience of arrhythmia related emotional reactions, and to develop more adaptive ways of responding to your condition. There is evidence that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) results in improvements in emotional distress.

Mindfulness Based CBT (MBCBT)

Mindfulness based CBT was originally developed to support an individual's long-term recovery from depression. Mindfulness is defined as paying attention to what is happening in the present moment (in the mind, body and external environment) with an attitude of curiosity and kindness.

Meditation is one technique to practice this type of attention, in order to use it in day to day life. For people with PoTS and syncope, it can be useful to help notice calmly and respond helpfully to symptoms. In emphasising that we can always 'deal' with things as they come up in the present moment, MBCBT can also help to resist getting drawn into unhelpful and distressing thoughts about the future.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Acceptance and commitment therapy places great emphasis on need to accept those difficulties and hardships which are out of our control, and which are an inevitable part of life. This does not mean giving up, but rather the approach feels that only when we accept these things, can we learn to stop throwing useless energy at things we cannot change. Then instead, we can consciously choose to direct our precious and limited time and energy to things which will improve our quality of life, and give us purpose and meaning. It is easy to see how these skills can be very useful in adjusting to long term health issues.

Healthy Living

Exercise is an important component of a healthy lifestyle, and exercising at a pace with which you are individually comfortable is sensible from a cardiovascular and emotional perspective. Prolonged periods of inactivity can be as harmful as overly strenuous exercise. Moderation is the key. The maintenance of normal weight, joint flexibility and muscular strength is important to global fitness. Eating a healthy diet is good for reducing your risk of heart disease, but it can also be of benefit even if you already have a heart condition. Eating the right diet can help stabilise your blood pressure, reduce your cholesterol, help control your weight and reduce the risk of other conditions such as diabetes. Dehydration can contribute to symptoms of your condition. Staying hydrated is important as dehydration can affect the heart rhythm and increase your blood pressure.



"I did not appreciate how important exercise is to mental health. It helps the brain to cope with stress and regulate anxiety."

PE Student



Syncope and diet

Blood pressure and heart rate can be influenced by what we eat and drink. These changes can be quite dramatic if you have been diagnosed with vasovagal syncope or postural tachycardia syndrome (PoTS).

It has been known for a long time that if you are dehydrated you are prone to fainting. When fluid intake is insufficient, or fluid loss is excessive, the volume of blood circulating in blood vessels becomes reduced and blood pressure falls. An average healthy adult requires at least 1.5 litres of fluid per day. When exercising or in a hot environment, much more may be needed. People who are affected by PoTS or vasovagal syncope are often advised to increase their fluid intake to over 2 litres a day, and more on a hot day. You may find it useful to drink from a refillable sports bottle, which will allow you to keep track of how much water you have drunk. For people with low blood pressure, it is especially important to make sure you are well hydrated.

It is important to avoid excess alcohol consumption, as alcohol dilates blood vessels and can lower blood pressure and provoke syncope. People with PoTS are often alcohol intolerant. It is not recommended to exceed 14 units of alcohol per week. A small glass of wine is one unit, a half pint is one unit, and a measure of a spirit is one unit.

Sometimes, people may experience deterioration in their symptoms after meals. This is because blood is diverted to the blood vessels which supply the organs in the abdomen in an effort to digest food. Because of this, it is better to eat little and often, and graze throughout the day. Eat regular meals, including breakfast.

Meals rich in refined carbohydrates such as sugars and white flour can make symptoms worse. If you like carbohydrate foods, try brown rice, pasta and wholegrain bread. If you have low blood pressure and syncope, you may be advised to increase your salt intake. Although a high salt diet can be helpful to some people, in others, too much salt can be harmful.

If you are taking a medication called fludrocortisone, you are prone to losing potassium. This can be dangerous, and you should be monitored with blood tests. If your levels are low, try to eat food containing lots of potassium such as bananas, avocados, dates, beans and lentils, spinach, mushrooms, melon and dried fruits.

Exercising with your Syncope

In an individual developing syncope, the first steps in terms of exercising is a proper medical assessment. Once that has been achieved and appropriate medication has been prescribed, physicians would normally encourage people to return to full and normal activities and to maintain general cardiovascular fitness.

Exercise is an important component of a healthy lifestyle and exercising according to a paced approach at a level with which you are individually comfortable is sensible from a cardiovascular and emotional perspective. Prolonged periods of inactivity can be as harmful as overly strenuous exercise: moderation is the key.

The best thing to do, is to listen to your own body. While some people are comfortable with running marathons, others may feel better going for a slow walk. As we know with syncope, nothing is black and white and the same rules do not apply to everybody. Exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle but exercising at a level with which you are individually comfortable is very important from a cardiovascular perspective.

Walking regularly is an excellent way of keeping fit, as are tai-chi and Zumba. However, if you plan to try more strenuous exercise such as a sport or going to the gym, it is a good idea to discuss this with your clinician before starting.

Swimming is a great aerobic exercise. If you have been going for some time with no ill effects, it is probably fine for you. Humans are adapted for life on dry land, and immersing the body in water squeezes blood from the extremities towards the chest. Cold water can have the same effect, as it causes surface blood vessels to narrow as a natural response in order to conserve heat.

Exercise and PoTS

One of the symptoms of PoTS is exercise intolerance. People tend to feel exhausted or unwell during or after quite limited activity, and this can continue for some hours or days afterwards. Some people therefore, avoid exercise, becoming increasingly unfit and this can cause PoTS to deteriorate further. However, there is evidence that if regular exercise is undertaken in the correct manner, a person's symptoms and quality of life can improve. People who struggle with exercise should start at a very low level of activity, preferably in a horizontal position. This may include pilates, swimming or biking. Intensity and duration should increase very gradually. People with PoTS can initially feel worse with exercise and should expect that improvements may not occur for many weeks.



The 5 elements approach to managing your condition

Water

Hydration- Achieving adequate hydration (water and salt) nutrition

Fire

Passions and interests- Relationships, inner-strength and value based living

Earth

Physical- Stretching and exercise, grounding exercises, mindful living, core-strength

Air

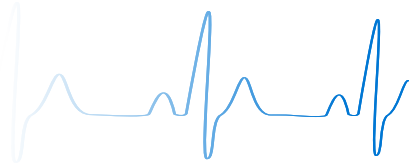
Calm- Sleep/ wake cycle, breathing, managing unhelpful thoughts, ways to switch off

Chemistry

Pharmacological -Support if needed



We all experience stress and at times it can feel overwhelming. If you think you need help, support or advice, then talk with your local health care professional for advice on how to access support and try some of the therapies we have outlined for you. For more information, contact STARS at info@stars-us.org



Working together to improve the diagnosis, treatment and quality of life for all those affected by syncope



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"Loved this booklet. I now constantly tell myself to keep calm and you can carry on."

Amanda J, teacher.

To view our patient resources, scan the QR code below:



Please remember that this publication provides general guidelines only. Individuals should always discuss their condition with a healthcare professional. If you would like further information or would like to provide feedback, please contact STARS.

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