

# DAILY ACTS OF BRAVERY

## LIVING WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS: COPING TOOLS FOR STRESS, ANXIETY, AND DEPRESSION

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# DAILY ACTS OF BRAVERY

- ❖ Living with Chronic Illness takes “Daily Acts of Bravery” (quote from author Patricia Fennell).
- ❖ When we talk about our mental health, we’re referring to our psychological, social and emotional well-being. This includes how we think, feel and act and determines how we handle stress, relate to ourselves and others, make decisions and choices and ultimately determines our ability to enjoy life and feel happy.

# AGENDA & FORMAT

- ❖ Universal Realities of Living with Chronic Illness
  - Stress Reaction, Chronic Stress & Managing Stress
- ❖ Coping Responses to Stress
  - Denial, Mindfulness, Compassion, Willpower
- ❖ Coping Tools for Managing: Anxiety, Depression
  - (Explore also Grief, Shame, Anger)
- ❖ 3 Essential Needs: Safety, Satisfaction, Connection
- ❖ Q&A/ Discussion

# UNIVERSAL REALITIES OF LIVING W/ CHRONIC ILLNESS

- ❖ Chronic Illness is often an “Invisible” Illness.
- ❖ Living with Chronic Disease in an Acute Disease-Oriented World.
- ❖ Mind-Body Connection: Illness causes both physical and psychological stress.

# WHAT IS STRESS

- ❖ Something is stressful if you perceive it as dangerous, difficult or overwhelming.
- ❖ We are resilient to short periods of stress.
- ❖ Both positive and negative experiences can produce stress

# WHAT IS THE STRESS REACTION

## ❖ Fight-Flight-Freeze Response

- Stress hormones: cortisol, adrenaline.
- Physical: muscle tension, butterflies in stomach, heart rate and breathing rate increase, cold hands and feet.
- Mental: worry, confusion, 'not quite yourself'.

## ❖ Tend and Befriend Response

- Stress hormone: oxytocin
- Oxytocin is cardio protective and anti-inflammatory
- This is beneficial to mind and body when we choose to be social--“who can I talk to about how I’m doing”, “how can I help someone in the same situation”.

# CHRONIC STRESS AND ITS BUFFERS

## ❖ Chronic stress impacts mind and body

- Can impair immune response, impact mood, impact sleep and motivation.

## ❖ Buffers as a result of managing stress:

- Increase our sense of control/ and increase our comfort with uncertainty.
- Increase our sense of predictability.
- Increase our sense of optimism--that we can make an impact, be effective and change.

# CHANGING THE WAY WE COPE

- ❖ When changing our reaction to stress, including our response to difficult emotions, it helps to remember that we have the capacity to change throughout our lifespan:
  - Neuroplasticity: “neurons that fire together wire together”. Anything that is conditioned can be unconditioned (new learning).
  - Start with Intention in order to lead to change.
- ❖ Next we’ll explore Denial, Mindfulness, Compassion, and Willpower Coping Responses



# COPING RESPONSE: DENIAL

## ❖ What is Denial?

- Denial can be an effective temporary response to stress.

## ❖ What can denial look like?

- Hiding feelings from yourself, reacting automatically, using defenses that may distort the situation.
  - You deny the losses you have experienced:
    - “I didn’t really want to do that anyway”
  - You don’t have any feelings about having my illness.
    - “I just feel numb”
  - You are tired a lot and feel drained but still do all the things you did before your illness onset.

## ❖ Denial is a stressor when relied upon as a coping mechanism over the long-term.

- It can become a non-response.

# COPING RESPONSE: MINDFULNESS

## ❖ What is Mindfulness?

- Definition: “Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” (Jon Kabat-Zinn).
- Recognizing what is happening, such as an emotion, without adding judgment.
- Includes qualities of: openness, observation, objectivity.
- Many benefits: decrease depression & anxiety, improve memory & concentration, increase empathy & improve judgment.

## ❖ Why is chronic not paying attention unhealthy ?

- We avoid dealing with the real problem.

# INCREASING MINDFULNESS

- ❖ Questions to ask to build awareness of emotions:
  - What is the label of my emotion when it arises?
  - What sensations in my body are connected this emotion?
  - What is the thought connected to the emotion?
  - What am I telling myself about the emotion?
  - How do I act in response to the emotion?

# COPING RESPONSE: COMPASSION

## ❖ What is Compassion?

- The willingness to feel your own or another's suffering with an attitude of kindness and acceptance, rather than avoidance.
- Living with Chronic Illness is an ongoing training in compassion.

## ❖ What are the benefits of Compassion?

- Less worry, increased happiness, greater well-being.

## ❖ What helps build Compassion?

- Intentional use of Mindful Awareness of suffering.
- Not diluting compassion: “others are worse off”.

# COPING RESPONSE: WILLPOWER

## ❖ What is Willpower/Self Control?

- The way to motivate us to do the difficult thing.
- A quality or ability you can strengthen.
- “Ideal Willpower” mode vs “Stress-based” mode.

## ❖ What sabotages Willpower:

- Guilt and shame, our inner critic, cravings.
- Not knowing our goals or lack of mindfulness of what’s important to us in the long-run.

## ❖ What helps build Willpower:

- Mindfulness practices like focused breathing
- Energy management (good nutrition and sleep)
- Self-compassion vs guilt and shame
- Breaking overwhelming tasks down into doable steps.

# WHAT IS ANXIETY

## ❖ What is Anxiety?

- Response of worry to something real or imagined.
- Our minds tend toward the negative, toward worry.

## ❖ What does anxiety feel like?

- Triggers confusion, sense of being overwhelmed, helpless, irritable.
- Physical sensations: rapid heart beat, shallow breathing, muscle tension, headaches, gut issues.

# COPING WITH ANXIETY

- ❖ Using Denial (Avoidance) increases Anxiety.
- ❖ Obsessive worry also increases Anxiety.
- ❖ What helps cope with Anxiety?
  - Breathing or relaxation exercises or other mindfulness-based practices.
  - Social Support.
  - Coping Thoughts (Positive Self-Talk): I can do this, this will pass.

# LOSS AND GRIEF

## ❖ What is Grief?

- Grief is normal and inevitable when you lose someone or something important to you.
- Grief vs Depression.

## ❖ Chronic Illness can create losses that are psychological, social, and physical.

- You can have physical, emotional, social and spiritual responses to grief.
- Not showing compassion for yourself hinders grief: “This shouldn’t matter so much to me.”



# WHAT HELPS THE GRIEF PROCESS

## ❖ Accept the Reality of the Loss:

- Mindfulness of grief: feel it in your mind and body.

## ❖ Acknowledge the Pain of the Loss.

- Grief allows you to let go of what you've lost when you accept what you now have in its place.
- We can be surprised when grief emerges when 'things are going really well'.

## ❖ Adapting to the Loss

- When you adapt, you reinvest in a new direction.

# WHAT IS DEPRESSION

- ❖ **Definition:** Frequent feelings of sadness, hopelessness or emptiness. Usually a distinct change in how you feel about yourself, how you act and interact with others, as well as an onset of specific physical symptoms. Usually always includes decreased interest in doing things you used to enjoy, such as seeing friends, hobbies.
- ❖ **Emotional symptoms:** Changed feelings about your self-worth, such as feeling worthless to some degree, frequent thoughts of death or thoughts of suicide.
- ❖ **Physical symptoms:** Less energy or fatigue nearly every day, difficulty concentrating, significant weight change, changes in sleep pattern, other's noticing you seem very restless or moving slowly.

# WHAT HELPS DEPRESSION

- ❖ Getting support: Observations by a loved one or outside observer. If you are thinking thoughts of suicide or if there is concern for depression, tell someone you trust and see a mental health professional.
  - Establish a sense of well-being, sense of safety within yourself. What are you grateful for? What do you find enjoyable? Remind yourself of safety, satisfaction and connection needs.
  - Bringing mindfulness to your feelings of depression, using willpower knowledge to make important changes that will decrease depression.
- ❖ Safely work through feelings of low self worth or shame and anger.

# WHAT IS SHAME

- ❖ What is Shame? A definition from author Brené Brown: “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging”.
  - Illness symptoms can create shame. Your own expectations of yourself and others’ expectations can trigger feelings of shame.
  - Ongoing shame can trigger feelings of low self-worth--not feeling good enough.

# WHAT WORSENS SHAME

- ❖ Using denial to manage shame makes it greater.
- ❖ Brown's research finds often the ways we have of dealing with shame, of NOT Feeling shame, worsen shame. When we're in shame, when we're experiencing shame, we're much more likely to respond in ways that increase shame:
- ❖ We hide, withdraw--go off the grid.
- ❖ Respond with "it's my fault, let me people please and make it better". I'll do whatever you think I should to fix the situation.
- ❖ Fight shame with shame, such as: "that person didn't deserve my trust anyway, or "I didn't want that friendship anyway."

# COPING WITH SHAME

Brene Brown calls this Shame resilience:

- ❖ Recognize shame and understand its triggers.
- ❖ Reality check the messages and expectations for yourself and from others that fuel this shame.  
Shame =I am bad. Guilt=I did something bad. What is your belief behind the shame, where did it come from?
- ❖ Reach out and tell your story to someone who won't judge you. Shame doesn't survive Empathy. Empathy is feeling understood and validated.
- ❖ Call shame-shame—mindfulness of shame.

# ANGER

## ❖ What is Anger?

- Anger is a powerful emotion that is healthy and normal when expressed appropriately.
- It can be unhealthy and destructive when not expressed appropriately, used to intimidate or harm.
- Anger toward self can turn to shame.
- Anger can 'cover' other emotions such as sadness, and grief.

# HANDLING YOUR OWN ANGER

- ❖ Get some distance from the source of anger and move your body in a healthy way.
- ❖ Awareness of thoughts and patterns: ask yourself:
  - Is there another way to perceive the situation?
  - Is getting angry effective to get what I want/need?
- ❖ Express anger in healthy ways using mindfulness, journal, talk with others, explore the feelings underneath the anger.



# SESSION SUMMARY

- ❖ There's much you can do to handle powerful emotions, to reduce stress and gain a sense of control when you feel overwhelmed and without much control—this will benefit your mind and body and lead to greater happiness.
- ❖ What is one take-away for you from this talk?



# Q&A/DISCUSSION

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