



Helping Canadians with Disability/Chronic Disease Get Physically Active: Tip Sheets for Intermediaries

For Canadians with a disability, regular physical activity may be even more important than it is for the rest of the population. For a person with a disability, an active lifestyle can open doors to increased health, social inclusion and self-empowerment - doors which might otherwise remain closed. Access to physical activity can eliminate the likelihood of acquiring secondary health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease. Being active builds resiliency and can provide an all-important outlet for a person with a disability.

These tip sheets are designed to provide general information in support of Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines, developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.

Anxiety Disorders

General Information

This tip sheet is designed to provide some general information about Anxiety Disorders. Concepts outlined in this paper should not be used as strict definitions or rules applicable to all those affected, but merely as guidelines. Every person is different. Remember, participants themselves are your number one resource when trying to ensure the inclusiveness of your physical activity programs.

In the mental health field we practice the recovery model. Pg. 122 of the Framework for Mental Health reads, *"Recovery is a process in which people living with a mental illness are empowered and supported to be actively engaged in their own journey of wellbeing."* The recovery process builds on individual, family, cultural and community strengths and enables people to enjoy a meaningful life in their community while striving to achieve their full potential. Recovery doesn't mean "cure" although cure is possible for some people.

Facts and Figures

Anxiety Disorders often appear first during one's teenage years but may also be related to having experienced psychological trauma or abuse. Some people respond well to the treatments and medications available and may appear to be functioning quite normally on many days but may show signs and symptoms on other days. In some cases, the side-effects of the medications used to manage symptoms can cause unique problems. A condition called Metabolic Syndrome may occur in which uncontrolled weight gain can happen regardless of healthy eating habits or lifestyle habits. Other side effects can be slurring of speech, uncontrolled movements such as twitches, and a peculiar foot-dragging shuffle. There are a whole range of other tools that can be utilized to help the person such as counselling, self-help/mutual aid groups, lifestyle changes and stress management techniques. Some individuals may appear well but are secretly struggling and wish not to share their personal health status. You must respect their right to privacy should they choose not to disclose their condition or its current status.

What is an Anxiety Disorder?

A person with an anxiety disorder has a reduced ability to cope with stressors and a heightened awareness that can lead to crippling fears and phobias. Anxiety Disorders can also include clinical depression.

Consequences of Anxiety Disorders

People's abilities may be greatly affected by an anxiety disorder. Symptoms can be severe or mild and may vary greatly from one day to the next. Common issues faced may include:

- hypervigilance, being easily startled and finding noisy rooms uncomfortable;
- cognitive (problems with memory, initiation, concentration, organization, and comprehension);
- panic attacks which include an impending sense of doom, elevated heart rate, sweating and chest pain which can mimic a heart attack;
- behavioural (depression, irritability, inability to sit still).

Working with a person who has an Anxiety Disorder

A person with an Anxiety Disorder may present with a combination of the above issues and that combination may change from one day to the next. They may exhibit compulsive behaviors as coping mechanisms to deal with their anxiety. They may also have reduced self-esteem or motivation. It is quite common for people to experience depression as a result of their anxiety disorder.

Understanding a Person with an Anxiety Disorder:

People with Anxiety Disorders may seem fearful or over-reactive. Clients may appear to be resistant to your suggestions. It is important to understand that often this behaviour is not intentional. They may also have poor short-term memory. People with Anxiety Disorders may not have good attendance due to the episodic nature of mental health issues. You need to be patient and encouraging but respect that the individual may understand that their fears are exaggerated, but they may have little ability to control their unrealistic fears. Their attendance may also be impacted during episodes by frequent medical appointments. People may exhibit repetitive behaviors used to calm themselves. Patience and understanding are your best tools for working with these individuals. Good communication is key to developing a successful working partnership.

Tips for Getting Active - Overcoming Barriers:

- Involve the person in physical activity goal setting - make sure goals are realistic. It may be helpful to provide some options for goals which they can choose from.
- Educate the individual and their family about the importance of physical activity.

- Know the individual's strengths and limitations - remember that everyone will have different limitations. Provide positive encouragement and support at all times.
- Be patient. Listen to the person and encourage them to communicate their needs to you - they are the experts at what they need, not you!

Teaching and Communication Technique

The following are ideas for ensuring maximum participation for people with Anxiety Disorders, depending on their abilities. You can use these strategies in combination:

- Memory - write instructions down.
- Inattention - minimize distractions during the activity, and try to keep things consistent.
- Limited concentration - provide frequent breaks and opportunity for rest.
- Physical limitations and fatigue - modify aspects of the activity to match with the person's physical abilities to promote success (i.e. lighter equipment, change size of activity area).
- Emotional - encourage success and mastery during physical activity in order to boost self-esteem, no matter what level (low or high) they may reach. It is important that they do not feel they have failed in any way.
- Social behaviour - use smaller groups, modeling a supportive approach and patience. Provide a structured environment, with frequent milestones as determined by the individual.

Physical Activity Tips and Modifications:

Anxiety Disorders can be unpredictable and change frequently, so make sure you are always aware of the person's strengths and weaknesses on that particular day. Patience and understanding can help you to meet the person's needs on their own terms.

Resources:

National Network for Mental Health - www.nnmh.ca

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