

Looking after your emotional well-being after a kidney transplant

Information for patients



Leeds Kidney
Unit

Looking after your emotional well-being after transplant

For many people having a kidney transplant is a positive experience. However, it is a big thing to go through and it can take some time to recover and adjust, both physically and emotionally. There are many things to adjust to such as new medications and frequent clinic visits. There may also be other changes that come with having a transplant for example financial changes, changes in relationships or family roles and day to day activities such as work.

The weeks and months after a transplant can be emotionally difficult as people start to think about what has happened. It is very normal to have some difficult thoughts and feelings during this time.

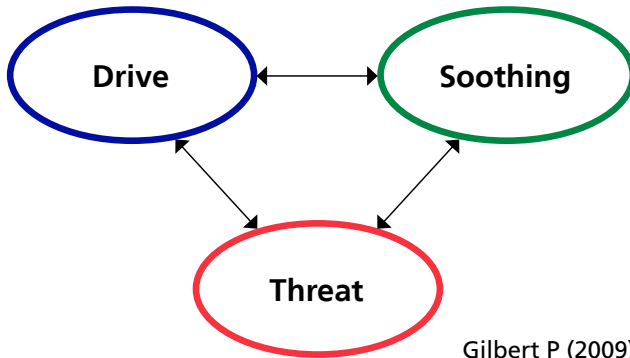
These might include:

- Difficult or upsetting thoughts about the donor
- Difficulties adjusting to a new routine or treatment
- Feeling anxious about keeping well
- Feeling pressure to move on with life or to live life to the full

Some people may experience difficulties soon after their transplant and for other people these may occur further down the line. Often people can have many different thoughts and feelings at the same time and this can feel overwhelming. For example, you may feel very happy to have had a transplant but also anxious about staying well. The next section in this leaflet offers a way of understanding our emotions.

Understanding our emotions

Research shows that there are three emotion systems in our brains which all have an important role.



Gilbert P (2009)

Threat system: This system is active when we feel under threat. It is linked to some difficult feelings such as anxiety, anger and guilt. As this system helps to protect us from threats, sometimes it can be activated very easily, especially when we have a lot of adjustments and new challenges, such as having a transplant. The threats might be difficult things happening in our lives (external threats) or they might be difficult things we are thinking or worrying about in our minds (internal threats).

Drive system: This system helps motivate us to achieve every day activities such as getting up and getting dressed. It is also linked to doing things we enjoy and make us feel excited such as sports or going out with friends.

Soothing system: This system is activated when we feel soothed, calm and connected to other people. For example, it may be active when other people are kind and caring towards us or when we are kind and caring towards ourselves.

Each system will change in strength depending on what we have happening in our lives and how we are feeling. Having a transplant can sometimes activate the threat system as there are many new things to adjust to and there can be difficult thoughts to manage.

Sometimes just recognising which system is the most active can help us to understand why we are feeling a certain way.

When our threat system is active, it can be helpful to think about ways to give the drive or soothing systems a boost. To activate the drive system you could think of things you enjoy doing such as hobbies or gentle exercise if you are able to. Sometimes if we feel low in mood, it can be hard to activate the drive system to do the everyday things that we need to do. If you are finding this difficult you may wish to access some further support (see below).

To activate the soothing system you could think of things that help you feel calm and relaxed. Some ideas are spending time with those who you are close to, listening to relaxing music, breathing exercises or mindfulness.

It is important to try and be kind and compassionate towards yourself following a transplant. You have been through a big life event so be gentle with yourself and allow time and space to recover physically and emotionally.

Gilbert P (2009) *The Compassionate Mind*. London, Constable.

Mindfulness

Some people find mindfulness to be a helpful way to cope with tricky thoughts and feelings and it can help to activate the soothing system. Mindfulness involves focussing on the present moment and gently acknowledging any thoughts and feelings without judging them.

Here is a short mindfulness exercise to try if you would like to. Although it may look or seem easy, mindfulness takes practice and can be tricky at first, especially if your threat system has been very active. It is often helpful to practice mindfulness when you are feeling relatively calm, before trying it out when your threat system is active.

A brief mindfulness exercise

Close your eyes or lower your gaze so you are focusing on the floor. If possible, try to have a comfortable upright posture and a gentle facial expression, perhaps a slight smile.

Focus on your breathing and notice the sensation of air coming in and out of your nose or mouth. Gently slow your breathing down and try and find a pattern that feels soothing and comforting for you.

If your mind wanders and you start to think about other things, gently bring your attention back to your breathing and the sensation of air coming in and out of your nose or mouth.

Continue with this breathing exercise for 30 seconds or more. After a few minutes open your eyes and take a few minutes to reconnect with your surroundings, before continuing with your day.

If you would like to learn more about mindfulness please visit www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/

Renal Clinical Psychology Service

If you are finding thoughts and feelings about your transplant difficult to cope with, there is help available from the Renal Clinical Psychology Service. Psychologists can help people in a variety of ways. Rather than prescribing medicines, clinical psychologists are trained to help people talk through their problems. The person you see will have an understanding of the psychological and emotional effects that transplant can have. Sometimes talking through problems can help people to find other ways of managing difficulties. You will not have to talk about anything that you don't want to.

If you feel that a referral to the Renal Clinical Psychology Service would be helpful, please speak to a member of the renal team.

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