# MENTAL HEALTH COLLECTION

Your guide to understanding and coping with the psychological impacts of vestibular disorders.

- 2 Counseling for Chronic Illness
- 8 Cognitive Impacts of Chronic
  Illness
- 12 Emotional Impacts of Chronic Illness
- 17 Addressing Self-Doubt
- 20 Vulnerability
- 22 Meditation & Mindfulness
- 30 Relaxation Strategies
- 32 Stress Management
- 34 Suicide Resources
- 36 References

#### **ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH**

Symptoms from vestibular disorders are invisible and unpredictable. This does not mean that they are imaginary, but that they often contribute to a wide range of psychological impacts. People who have a vestibular disorder often need support and may benefit from counseling to cope with lifestyle changes, depression, guilt, and grief that comes from no longer being able to meet their own or others' expectations.

In this collection, we talk about the cognitive and emotional impacts of vestibular disorders, counseling for chronic illness, stress management, and more.



# Counseling for Chronic Illness

By Tod Fiste, LPC

Dealing with a chronic illness or medical condition goes far beyond the physiological and medical challenges it poses. Chronic illness can strain your view of yourself, your relationships, your place in society, and your plans for the future.

Psychotherapy (also known as 'counseling' or just 'therapy') is a valuable resource when you are struggling with these challenges. Unfortunately, many people don't really know what therapy is or how it can help them, and there are some common misconceptions that make therapy sound intimidating or even threatening.

My goal here is to help the reader become more informed in a general way about some of the different ways that therapy can be helpful. These categories are my own; while I believe they are useful, they do not map exactly to terms you may read or hear in therapist's self-descriptions. In fact, for the purpose of this article I will try to stay away from specific labels; in a future article I will try to link these to specific terminology that you might see.

Rather, consider this a broad way of thinking about the different types of goals or outcomes you could seek from therapy. **They are not mutually exclusive**, and any given therapist may be more or less expert at helping in one or more of these ways.

#### **RESOURCING**

This is the process of identifying resources that would be of help to you (AKA "assessment"), finding or helping you find specific places to go for those resources, and possibly assisting or coaching you as you access

those resources. "Resources" could be counselors, agencies, programs, clinics, hospitals, support groups, doctors, or any number of other sources of assistance.

This is a role traditionally played by social workers. Indeed, social workers at government or private agencies may be able to provide this kind of assistance to you. In private practice, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) might be a good choice. Be aware, however, that not all LCSWs necessarily focus on this kind of work; by the same token, many private practice therapists who are not LCSWs are quite skilled at providing this kind of assistance. Some medical doctors may also be able to provide help of this kind.

A counselor providing this kind of assistance may have specific expertise, such as helping people with chronic illness. Even if they do not have such expertise, a skilled provider should have the knowledge and contacts necessary to research your needs and corresponding resources more quickly, completely, and effectively than you could yourself.

#### **PSYCHO-EDUCATION**

This is the process of helping you understand aspects of individual psychology, emotions, relationships, neurobiology, and any of a number of other areas that could be of help in making sense of your experience and making the changes you want.

Psycho-education is usually not enough by itself to create significant change. If it were, reading a good self-help book would be as effective as therapy. For some people, however, intellectual understanding of what is happening for them is a very important part of the process of change, healing, and growth. It could normalize your experience, help you to stop judging yourself as being morally deficient, and give you insight into how to deal with it more effectively. It can promote a sense of safety and control, and therefore provide or increase motivation.

#### **SKILL BUILDING**

Most of us learned some very important life skills, like dealing with our emotions or communicating effectively in relationship, by a very haphazard process of observing those around us. For many of us this has resulted in some significant holes in our psychological, emotional, and relational skill sets. Sometimes we learned poor skills that we need to un-learn so we can discover healthier ways to do things.

Therapy can be a kind of life extension course for these skills. This is actually a primary goal of some kinds of therapy, such as couples counseling or relational therapy groups. A good therapist can teach you these important

life skills and coach you in practicing them and becoming proficient at employing them.

#### **SYMPTOM RELIEF**

The goal here is generally to alleviate painful or disruptive symptoms that a client identifies as causing distress or problems in his or her life. Symptoms can be simple or complex, and symptom treatment can be correspondingly easy or difficult, and quick or longer term. A symptom like "panic attacks whenever you get into a car since being in a bad accident" is relatively easy to identify and treat; a symptom like "a lifelong pattern of apparently random outbursts of rage" is likely to be considerably less straightforward.

Simply identifying a client's symptoms accurately can in itself be a significant task. For example, if you have experienced low-level anxiety for most of your life you may not even notice it as anything out of the ordinary, but it may be related to an apparently sudden bout of depression or panic attacks.

There are many approaches to providing symptom relief. None of them are perfect, and most come with both pros and cons. We would all like to think that every symptom has a clear and consistent treatment to resolve it, but this is probably even less true for psychological symptoms than for medical ones. People have different personalities, unconscious patterns, beliefs, etc., and therefore what works very well for one person may be a poor fit for another.

MEDICATION VS TALK THERAPY					
Medication	Pros     Fast-acting  Cons     Potential negative side effects     Ineffective if not taken consistently     Efficacy may change over time.				
Talk Therapy	<ul> <li>Pros</li> <li>No dug sid effects</li> <li>Cons</li> <li>Potentially uncomfortable for some people.</li> <li>Takes time to see improvements.</li> <li>Efficacy depends on umplementation of the therapist's recommendaitons.</li> </ul>				

For example, a common choice regarding symptom relief in certain situations is medication or talk therapy. Medication is widely perceived to be fasteracting than talk therapy, with disadvantages such as side effects, the need to remember to take the medication consistently, and a tendency for meds' efficacy to change over time for many people. Talk therapy eliminates drug side effects, but some people may find it uncomfortable in other ways, and symptom relief can take longer and be more dependent on the client's ability to follow the therapist's suggestions. (I use this as an example; in actual practice, a combination of medication and talk therapy can be most effective, as is often true with depression.)

Focusing on symptoms can be both a strength and weakness in therapy. One strength is that identifying a clear, specific problem to resolve helps the therapy stay focused and makes it easier to assess how successful the therapy is and when the therapy is done. A weakness is that it requires a definitive specificity that many clients are not able to provide, especially at the beginning of therapy. Also, some life situations that bring people to therapy are not easy to reduce to symptoms and diagnoses, and attempting to do so can create other problems.

#### **SUPPORT**

This is primarily emotional support: the proverbial shoulder to cry on, a place where it is safe to express whatever you need to. It is a role that for some people is provided by friends, family, clergy, or their community.

Unfortunately, many people in today's society have limited support networks or do not want to "burden" those close to them. Some people can not safely share some of their experience with those who might be expected to be



supportive. Sometimes it is difficult to find people who will just listen, rather than try to fix or change you.

This is a legitimate use for therapy. Everyone goes through rough patches in their life at times: the loss of a loved one, a professional setback, a difficult transition from one phase of life to the next, etc. Sometimes temporary emotional support is all that is needed, or part of what is needed.

A good therapist has a large capacity for being compassionate and empathetic. You can unburden yourself to a counselor without having to worry about offending a loved one, being judged, or having someone else find out what you said.

### THERAPY AND CHRONIC ILLNESS

Having a chronic illness would pose a challenge to even the most psychologically healthy individuals. We all use conscious and unconscious coping strategies, and none of those strategies is perfect. Chronic illness sometimes produces a "perfect storm" that exposes and magnifies every weakness in those strategies. On the other hand, for some people their medical condition presents a less earthshaking but still challenging set of logistical and practical obstacles to deal with. As I hope the above list shows, there are a number of different ways that therapy can be helpful throughout a wide range of degrees of distress.

If you suffer from a vestibular disorder or other kind of chronic illness, the last thing you want to hear is that it is "all in your head." However, it is true that stress, anxiety, depression, and a number of other mental health challenges can sometimes exacerbate and even precipitate some medical conditions. Also, medical conditions, especially chronic ones, can certainly cause or create "mental health" problems. So there are very good reasons to think that counseling could be helpful and appropriate for people dealing with chronic illness - reasons that have nothing to do with hypochondria or craziness.

Some people are understandably put off by the language of the mental health field that is currently common, particularly the label "mental illness." Please be aware that you do not need to be "mentally ill" to benefit from therapy, and that plenty of therapists will work with you without pathologizing you. It is true that some therapists work from the "medical model" - where the steps are assessment of the symptoms, diagnosing the illness, and treating it - but this is not a prerequisite for good therapy.

#### LIFE WORK

Sometimes the task at hand is in the form of major healing or growth that is more like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly than a broken bone healing. The written Chinese character that means "crisis" also means "opportunity", because in every crisis is an opportunity for something new to emerge.

As with many significant life events, chronic illness can present a risk of becoming hopeless and self-hating as well as possessing a great potential for transformative psychological healing and growth. This is the domain of life work, where people transform deeply held unconscious beliefs and patterns, expand their awareness of possibility in their lives, and find ways to create more satisfaction and fulfillment in their relationships with themselves and others.

This is the work you want to do when you are asking big questions, such as: "Who am I?" "What is my purpose in life?" "Why am I never satisfied?" "What am I wanting from intimate relationship?" There can be a spiritual aspect of such work, although this is not essential.

The most powerful life work will often move fluidly between bigger spiritual or philosophical explorations and specific personal challenges and wounds. Some therapists do this better than others; if this is your goal, it is worth the effort to find someone adept at this kind of work.

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## Cognitive Impacts

By Dr. Rachel Bilgrei, PsyD, with contributions from Joanna Wolfson, PhD

Vestibular disorders affect individuals physically AND psychologically. And while it is important to understand your physical symptoms, it is equally important to understand your psychological symptoms as they can often trigger and/or exacerbate your physical symptoms.

Cognitive is just a fancy word for thinking. When I use the phrase cognitive aspects of vestibular disorders, I am referring to how your vestibular disorder affects your ability to think, specifically to pay attention and concentrate, to remember, to reason and to problem solve.

#### **DISORIENTATION AND CONFUSION**

Disorientation and confusion are common during the acute stages of vestibular disorders. In these very frightening and disturbing moments, a sense of time and place might feel non-existent. Fortunately, these moments are relatively short-lived. As the physical symptoms fade, clarity, and comprehension return.

#### **VISION & COGNITIVE FUNCTIONING**



Due to the intricate link between the vestibular system and the visual system, problems with visual-spatial tasks are common in people with vestibular disorders. Many studies pinpoint the strong link between vestibular dysfunction and difficulties with spatial memory, navigation, and mental rotation (Chari et al., 2022). This link might be due in part to the brain's anatomy, as the hippocampus is involved in our vestibular functioning as well as spatial memory (Besnard et al., 2012). However, in general, mechanisms of overlap in vestibular and cognitive domains are still unclear. Regardless of etiology, people

with vestibular conditions might find their eye-hand coordination and depth perception to be thrown off-course.

#### **COGNITIVE STAMINA/ENERGY**

Cognitive energy is finite for everyone. If you are using a great deal of this energy to maintain equilibrium and stay steady (something that is normally done automatically), it is unlikely that you will have very much left over for other activities. As a result, cognitive fatigue sets in. Activities that you used to be able to perform with ease and very little effort now require much more effort, leaving you drained of energy and requiring rest/naps. Spontaneity goes right out the window.

#### ATTENTION AND CONCENTRATION

Vestibular disorders interfere with your ability to pay attention and concentrate. You may find that it is difficult to sustain focus for a significant length of time. You may find you are easily distracted – both by external stimuli (the noise of other people talking, the TV) and internal stimuli (your thoughts and feelings). Multi-tasking, the ability to do and keep track of two processes at the same time can also be compromised. Another area of attention/concentration that is often affected in people that have vestibular disorders is sequencing. For example: you may find yourself mixing up sounds while speaking or reversing numbers or letters when speaking or writing. You may have trouble following directions, filling out forms, following a recipe, or tracking conversation or plot in a movie.

#### THE PROBLEM WITH MEMORY

The most common cognitive complaint I have heard in my clinical experience working with people living with vestibular disorders has been difficulties with memory. And the problem seems to be more with short-term memory (remembering why you just came into a room) rather than long-term memory (recalling the name of your best childhood friend). Often, but not always, what is perceived as a memory problem is really a problem with attention. I like to use a bank model of memory to explain this phenomenon. To deposit money into your bank account, there are a series of steps that you need to execute to ensure your money is properly deposited so that at some later date, it will be there for you to withdraw. The same is true for your brain and processing information to be stored in memory. There are specific steps it goes through to ensure that information gets "deposited" so that it is available for retrieval or "withdrawal" at some later point. At the bank as well as in your brain, if the steps are not followed properly, the money/information gets lost and thus is not available for future use. The cognitive strain of a vestibular disorder can interfere with this "depositing" or encoding process of information. As such, if the information is never properly encoded, there is no way it will be available at some later date for retrieval.

#### YOUR EXECUTIVE MAY NOT BE FUNCTIONING

Imagine that just inside your forehead is a very important person sitting at a very large desk. This person is the executive of your brain, the person in charge of managing, overseeing, and coordinating all the functions of your brain. Specifically, this person is responsible for organization, problem-solving, decisionmaking, and self-monitoring. In addition, this person provides you with a sense of internal certainty, that thoughts get organized, and plans get executed, seemingly automatically. These abilities are referred to as executive functioning. Unfortunately, in the presence of a vestibular disorder, your executive functioning may not be functioning very well. This person is asleep under the desk! Overworked, under-resourced, he/she is just too overwhelmed, and this automaticity that you so readily rely on is gone. Plans, even the simplest ones, such as getting yourself dressed in the morning may be completely disorganized...and disorganizing. You may find it difficult deciding what to have for breakfast. Activities that were automatic, that you never had to even think twice about, now must be meticulously focused on and thought about.

COPING STRATEGIES						
DIFFICULTY	COPING STRATEGY					
Disorientation and confusion	Breath. Repeat the mantra: "This will pass. I'm OK."					
Cognitive fatigue	Conduct self-checks of your mental energy. Pac yourself. Take breaks.					
Attention/ concentration	Enlist all sense modes to take in information. Listen to what is being said, write it down, read it, and say it out loud.					
Visual Skills	Visit large stores at off-peak hours. Read from a print out rather than from a computer screen. Listen to information rather than reading it.					
Memory	Make lists and check them often.					
Executive functioning	Create a structure and routine to your day and follow it consistently. Use an organizer/daily planner. Prioritize.					

#### The difficulties described above

can, and unfortunately often do, significantly interfere with day-to-day life. In response to these cognitive changes, you may feel that your abilities have diminished, both at home and at work. However, it is not your abilities that are diminished. It is your cognitive stamina that is depleted because it is being used for a function that, prior to having a vestibular disorder, it didn't need to be used for in the past. Reading is laborious, using the computer

is painful and frustrating, balancing your checkbook is near impossible. Or if it is possible, you are doing things very differently than you did before. For example, you may find you operate at a slower pace, needing a lot more time to accomplish tasks than you used to, or with help from others. You may have found a more simplistic approach to accomplishing tasks, one that gets the job done but not nearly as satisfactorily. You may also have trouble navigating large supermarkets or department stores.

#### **COPING STRATEGIES**

Thankfully, there are ways to combat and overcome these difficulties and improve functioning. The chart below pairs each problem area discussed above with a variety of coping skills you can utilize to minimize and/or compensate for these difficulties. Rest, proper nutrition, and appropriate exercise are also key components to managing areas of cognitive difficulty.

#### **TREATMENT**

Participating in treatment offers individualized attention to your specific problem areas while also providing normalization, validation, and support. Sometimes professional help begins with a neuropsychological evaluation. This evaluation can provide detailed information about your cognitive functions. It identifies your strengths and weaknesses, areas in which you are functioning normally and areas in which you are having problems. With the results of this evaluation, treatment recommendations are made, usually for a course of cognitive rehabilitation. Cognitive rehabilitation can be done by an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, or a psychologist. A first step is increasing awareness and self-monitoring of difficulties. Once problems are clearly identified and understood, there are two routes available: (1) cognitive retraining (a physical therapy for the brain) to remediate problem areas and (2) learning compensatory strategies. In cognitive retraining, skills (such as attention and concentration) are practiced and strengthened through a variety of exercises. Learning compensatory strategies involves utilizing strengths to overcome weaknesses and developing a "bag of tricks" that you can employ to get around problem areas.

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# Emotional Aspects of Vestibular Disorders

By Dr. Rachel Bilgrei, PsyD, with contributions from Joanna Wolfson, PhD

Vestibular disorders affect individuals physically AND psychologically. And while it is important to understand your physical symptoms, it is equally important to understand your psychological symptoms as they can often trigger and/or exacerbate your physical symptoms.

The mind/body connection is complex. Emotional factors - the way we think, feel, and behave - can have a significant effect, for better or worse, on our physical health and our capacity to recover from illness or health setbacks. Emotions can trigger genuine physiological arousal. In the context of a vestibular disorder, a vicious cycle may develop whereby physical symptoms initially triggered by your condition result in anxiety and/or other emotional responses and further increase feelings of dizziness, vertigo, or other vestibular symptoms.

#### **COMMON EXPERIENCES**

In my work treating individuals with vestibular disorders, I have identified frequently occurring experiences and issues that can set off emotional disturbance. It starts with the diagnostic process. The lengthy, convoluted journey of visiting numerous specialists offering various opinions can be frustrating, to say the least. What's worse, some of you might have been told your symptoms are being caused by anxiety and depression and that the symptoms are "in your head." At the other end of the spectrum, some of you may have been sent to specialists to rule out frightening-sounding conditions (e.g., a stroke or other neurological condition). Even in the setting of reassurance about results, this testing experience is traumatic.

The sudden onset of symptoms, the unpredictability, and variability that

often occur with a vestibular disorder are terrifying, unsettling and turn your world upside down... literally and figuratively. Another common experience I've often heard people describe is what I refer to as the invisibility of your illness.

Vestibular disorders are, well, invisible... and thus more likely to be misunderstood. Most of the time people with vestibular disorders don't look sick or unwell. Unlike a broken limb, a runny nose, a cough, or a positive blood test or scan, the damage/injury can't be seen, furthering this lack of understanding. However, invisible does not mean imaginary. This invisibility can lead to another common concern: a fear of being dismissed or misperceived as lazy.

"IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD." THIS CAN MAKE YOU FEEL MISUNDERSTOOD, FRUSTRATED AND ALONE.

Other common concerns include worrying you may be perceived as drunk due to balance issues and sensitivity to light, sounds and geometric patterns.

#### **ANXIETY**

Anxiety, fear, and panic are probably the most common emotional responses people have when diagnosed with a vestibular disorder. Anxiety often manifests in response to feeling ungrounded and insecure about being steady on your feet. A fear of falling due to imbalance, dizziness or lightheadedness is commonly reported. Panic attacks are also commonly reported. A panic attack is "an abrupt surge of intense fear or intense discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes and during which time [symptoms such as palpitations, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, nausea, feeling dizzy] occur" (DSM-V, 2013). Individuals with vestibular conditions often experience hypervigilance to their bodies, which can easily put them in "fight or flight" mode if a situation feels slightly threatening. Even if not full-blown panic, "fight or flight" involves breath holding, muscle tension, and dizziness, which can perpetuate the anxiety-dizziness cycle.

In the context of a vestibular condition, a panic attack only serves to exacerbate physical symptoms, as well as trigger fears of losing control. It is no wonder that given the predominance of physiological symptoms, a panic attack or even a less intensive "fight or flight" state can be mistaken for a medical condition, such as a heart or asthma attack, and precipitate dizzy spells.

In response to anxiety, fear and panic, individuals with vestibular conditions may experience increased social isolation, withdrawing from social interaction and avoiding activities that normally bring them pleasure and satisfaction. It is important to note that it is very often fear and anxiety, not the actual physical symptoms that interfere with functioning.

#### **SADNESS & DEPRESSION**

Having a vestibular disorder often results in a change in lifestyle. Changes to your activity level (at home and at work), your independence, your

abilities, your stamina, and your relationships are experienced as losses. Loss, grief, and the process of mourning are just some of the feelings and experiences that these changes arouse. Social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness. Feeling misunderstood by family members, friends, even physicians



fosters a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Guilt is commonly expressed in response to not being able to perform your usual duties and responsibilities. In addition, you may experience sleep and appetite disturbance and lethargy. These are the many forms and manifestations that sadness and depression can take in response to a vestibular condition.

#### **RELATIONSHIPS**

"I get dizzy too" or "You just need to be less anxious." Are these responses you've heard from family members, friends, even physicians when you explain your vestibular symptoms? It wouldn't be surprising if you have heard them ... and felt misunderstood, frustrated and alone. Add to these feelings the need to rely more on others, to be more dependent on family members and friends for help with tasks you could easily do on your own previously and what you've got is a new challenge of managing interpersonal stress that didn't exist before your vestibular condition. This tension in relationships often leads to increased arguments, social withdrawal, and loss of closeness and connection with even the most important people in your life at a time when these connections are vital.

#### YOUR SENSE OF SELF

I was once running an educational group for people suffering from vestibular disorders and we were discussing the emotional impact of their respective conditions. One person described looking at herself in the mirror and not recognizing the reflection staring back at her. Nothing about her physical appearance had changed, but she felt like such a different person that she was basically unrecognizable to herself.

This anecdote painfully demonstrates the kind of change to your sense of self that can occur to those living with a vestibular disorder. The discrepancy between how you know yourself now and how you knew yourself before erodes self-esteem and self-worth. Unable to perform your usual responsibilities, changes in your role in relationships, and difficulty performing your job can

really call into question your identity and how you know yourself. This is probably the most profound change expressed by individuals with vestibular conditions.

#### **COPING STRATEGIES**

Thankfully, there are ways to overcome these difficulties and improve your mood, functioning, and quality of life. An important first step is awareness. Understanding your own emotional responses to the stress of having a vestibular disorder is an imperative first step in the process of recovery, both psychologically and physically. This can lead to an informative and inspiring exploration into the dynamics of your individual stress triggers and their origins. Keeping a daily journal that tracks activities, suspected and known symptom triggers, degree and frequency of symptoms, and strategies employed to combat each symptom can be a helpful tool in increasing awareness and self-monitoring of difficulties. In addition, learning stress management techniques can be quite effective in minimizing the emotional aspects of vestibular disorders. A variety of relaxation techniques, such as diaphragmatic breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and visualization/ imagery can combat negative feelings and help to feel more in control. Other cognitive techniques include challenging or stopping unhelpful thought processes and the use of positive self-statements. And while it may be difficult and unfamiliar, asking others for help can eliminate some unnecessary stress and strain while also allowing others to get a sense of what you're going through.

#### **COPING STRATEGIES**

- Educate yourself and your family
- Increase awareness and self-monitoring of difficulties
- Identify symptoms of stress
- Identify triggers of stress
- Learn stress management techniques
- Ask for help
- Improve communication skills
- Have a sense of humor!
- Learn the value of acceptance
- Join a support group
- Individual psychotherapy

#### **TREATMENT**

Participation in psychotherapy provides support, validation, normalization, and coping skills in an individualized setting. Heightened emotions, especially negative ones, can interfere with and hinder your physical recovery by exacerbating your physical symptoms. Working with a therapist to better manage your emotions will maximize your physical recovery. A therapist can also work with you on identifying, learning, and applying the various stress management techniques mentioned above into your day-to-day life. Using these techniques consistently can help to restore a sense of control.

Working with a therapist also provides an opportunity to address the interpersonal

tension that often coexists with a vestibular disorder through developing improved communication skills. Treatment can and often does involve family members and close friends to facilitate their education of your disorder, as well as to work on improving communication. In addition, being in treatment can facilitate acceptance of this new aspect of your identity, helping you to create a more integrated sense of self. Participation in a support group can also really help to minimize feeling misunderstood and alone while providing validation.

It is not easy to share these kinds of complications. It takes strength and courage. But the benefits are well worth it.

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# Addressing Self-Doubt

By Albert J. Bernstein, PhD, with the Vestibular Disorders Association

Thirty years of experience as a therapist has taught me that, brain chemistry notwithstanding, what causes most psychological problems is internal conflict. I find this to be particularly true in my work with people with vestibular disorders.

Most vestibular patients, and many of the physicians who treat them, believe that their psychological problems are directly caused by the symptoms themselves. There is no question that chronic unsteadiness and bouts of vertigo are stressful, but, in my experience at least, patients can learn to cope with this kind of stress by seeing it as separate from themselves, an uninvited guest with whom they must live.

The stress caused by internal conflicts is far more corrosive. Even patients who have made an uneasy peace with their symptoms may experience a subtle erosion of self-esteem that arises from a discrepancy between what they think they are, and what they believe they should be. Vestibular patients are always questioning themselves, and it is these questions that cause such damaging stress:



#### AM I MAKING THIS UP?

Vestibular disorders are invisible and unpredictable. This does not mean that they are imaginary. There is a strong cultural tendency in both laypeople and medical professionals to suspect that anything that doesn't show up in a blood test or a scan is "all in your head." Not that anyone would ever say such a thing, but every vestibular patient I know has heard an echo of this thought frequently enough to take it to heart.

#### **AM I STUPID? AM I JUST LAZY?**

With a vestibular disorder, the process of maintaining balance, which is usually automatic, must be done consciously. This effort takes a tremendous amount of psychological energy. If the mind were a computer, we could say that just figuring out which end is up uses most of the available RAM-leaving precious little for

#### **SELF DOUBT**

Vestibular patients are always questionning themeselves, which can cause damaging stress and erode selfesteem. Exhaustion does not equal laziness. It's OK to ask for help.

other tasks, such as thinking. And a growing body of research suggests that vestibular disorders also have a direct effect on cognitive functioning. 1

Whatever the cause, vestibular patients cannot think as easily or as well as they once did. Many fear that they are developing Alzheimer's disease in addition to a vestibular disorder. Frightening as this thought may be, there is a possibility they fear even more—that they are simply lazy. They have discovered that if they push themselves hard enough, they can perform as well as they once did, or nearly so. They are slower, it takes a great deal more energy, and they may be exhausted for days afterward, but they can do it.

When they can't, they wonder if it is only because they are unwilling to make a sufficient effort. And when they are successful in pushing their physical limits, they may become demoralized by how much the effort fatigues them.

#### DO I DESERVE SPECIAL TREATMENT?

If you accommodate a handicap, the handicapped person's life gets better. If you accommodate neurosis or laziness, these will get worse. Vestibular patients are painfully aware of this distinction, but they are seldom sure which group they fall into. As a result, they may sometimes, as a matter of principle, avoid asking for help. They may also squander energy on unimportant tasks in order to achieve even a small sense of accomplishment. Then, when more important issues come along and they find themselves short of resources, they suspect themselves of moral turpitude rather than of poor planning.

Therapy for the corrosive self-doubts of vestibular patients involves external validation of the disorder by physicians, therapists, family members, support groups, and organizations such as VeDA. Only when patients truly understand the nature of their disorder can they develop the internal pragmatism that will help them to heal. When a patient's physical and cognitive resources are limited, they must be used first for what is most important. It is the process of setting realistic priorities that for vestibular patients is the first step in treating the psychological aspects of their disorder.

#### Dr. Bernstein is a clinical psychologist and author.

This article is adapted from the "Clinical Observations" column in the summer 2007 issue of On the Level. "Clinical Observations" provides health professionals with an opportunity to share information about diagnosis and treatment experiences.

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## Vulnerability

By Tod E. Fiste, LPC

One of the common aspects of having a debilitating illness or medical condition is a greatly increased sense of vulnerability. When there are things you cannot do for yourself, you are necessarily more dependent on others. This can have profound effects on your sense of identity, confidence, and selfworth.

#### **VULNERABILITY DOES NOT MEAN WEAKNESS**

The more strongly your identity is linked to seeing yourself as strong and independent, the more likely you are to perceive increased vulnerability as decreasing your self-worth. This likelihood is increased when you live in a culture where independence, strength, and individualism are highly valued, as tends to be true in the U.S.

There are good reasons to question the belief that vulnerability equates to weakness, as researcher Brené Brown does in her book "Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead" and in her popular Ted Talks presentation. She argues very eloquently that the ability to be vulnerable is fundamental to creating and maintaining intimate relationships. As such, vulnerability is not a weakness. Rather, the courage to be vulnerable forms the foundation of our relational lives.

#### **VULNERABILITY IN RELATIONSHIPS**

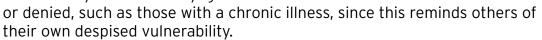
Of course, the vulnerability you experience due to a medical condition is not perfectly equivalent to the vulnerability you experience in an intimate relationship. Yet I would argue that one of the biggest apparent differences - that vulnerability due to illness is imposed on you, while you chose to be vulnerable in relationship - is largely illusory.

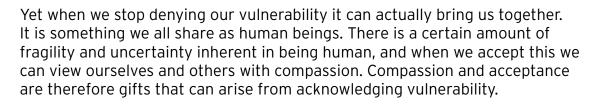
Intimate relationships are necessary for a healthy, happy life. So if vulnerability is a necessary ingredient for intimate relationship, then it follows that

the ability to be vulnerable is not optional if you want to be healthy and happy. From this perspective, a debilitating illness may make your vulnerability more apparent, but it doesn't make you fundamentally different from those who are "healthy."

#### INDIVIDUAL INDEPENDENCE

Our culture's emphasis on individual independence leads to a great deal of denial about our vulnerability. This can lead to rejection of people whose vulnerability can't be easily ignored







Rather than simply being a burden on others, people with chronic medical conditions can provide others with an opportunity to heal and grow their

relationship with their own disowned vulnerabilities. Those who develop greater compassion and acceptance through illness-inspired self-work can be valuable teachers to others living in undeserved shame of their own imperfections.

Dealing with a chronic illness is unquestionably a challenging path to walk. Don't forget that the vulnerability inherent in walking gives you more in common with others rather than less, and that the courage you develop to accept that vulnerability is its hard gift to you and your gift to others.

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# Meditation and Mindfulness

By Lisa Farrell, PT, PhD, AT, C

#### BUSTING THROUGH MISCONCEPTIONS AND BUILDING OPPORTUNITY FOR SUCCESS

When meditation comes up in conversation people often say, "Oh, I tried that, and afterward, I felt so calm and relaxed." If this has been your experience, that's wonderful! Feeling calm and relaxed can be one of the many benefits that occur from practicing meditation.

However, people also say, "I can't meditate. It's too hard for me." If this has been your experience, you are not alone. You might have the expectation that your mind should be quiet and your body relaxed during meditation. When it isn't, you feel like you're doing it wrong or it isn't working.

Other common reasons people give for not meditating include:

- "I can't sit still long enough to do it."
- "I don't have time to meditate."
- "It's not for me because it is too weird."

Even though social media has been a game changer for providing easy access to guided meditation, these resources can be off-putting if they don't provide clear guidance. Lack of proper instruction and clear explanation are frequently obstacles for a successful meditation practice.

Meditation is a mind-body practice with a wide variety of techniques from both ancient and modern times. Some of the current popular forms of meditation are Mindfulness Meditation, Transcendental Meditation<sup>™</sup>, Vipassana (or Insight) Meditation, Metta (or Loving Kindness) Meditation, as well as movement-based meditations like Yoga, Tai Chi, and Qi Gong. What

unites the various schools of meditation is the intention to build attention and awareness by observing and experiencing the present moment.

This article focuses on Mindfulness Meditation and covers its definition, importance, and best practices. Also, some insights and suggestions for using this type of meditation are provided for those dealing with the consequences of vestibular dysfunction.

Beyond helping to calm the mind, regularly practicing meditation has many benefits, including:

MEDITATION BENEFITS			
Encourages creativity and innovation			
Fosters self-awareness			
Cultivates compassion for oneself and others			
Activates the healing response			
Promotes emotional and physical well-being			
Enhances the ability to focus			

#### **ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS**

#### WHAT IS MINDFULNESS MEDITATION?

The practice of mindfulness has you simply pay attention to the present moment by placing your focus in a particular way... without judgment, with curiosity, and with a gentle awareness.

#### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO BE MINDFUL?

Most of the time, our attention is not where we want it to be. Our thoughts and emotions, hopes or worries for the future, and memories and regrets from the past can distract us. An inner voice tends to chatter away nonstop and can be likened to monkeys that jump around from tree to tree, often referred to as having a "monkey mind." Modern living only makes the "monkey mind" worse as we try to keep up with all the input that comes from social

media and try to manage all of our responsibilities. Besides having difficulty living in the present moment, we tend to live life on autopilot by doing things unconsciously. Living with a monkey mind and on autopilot hijacks our attention from the present moment here and now. Most people live this way for most of their lives, and, therefore, they don't get the chance to fully experience or appreciate their lives. However, it is in this moment that we live our lives-not in the past, which is no longer happening, and not in the future, which has yet to come. Mindfulness meditation focuses our attention by settling the monkey mind and turning off our autopilot, allowing us the opportunity to reap the benefits life offers.

#### **HOW IS MINDFULNESS MEDITATION PRACTICED?**

Although this article is not a replacement for being properly instructed in mindfulness meditation, here are the basics to help you have a better understanding:

**When to meditate:** When you mediate does not matter. Choose a time that works best for you and practice every day, which reinforces and deepens your commitment to meditation. However, practicing right before bed is not recommended for everyone because meditation can sometimes energize you and affect your sleep.

**The place to meditate:** You can meditate wherever you feel comfortable. Ideally, choose a place that is convenient to access and quiet. Avoid potential distractions---turn off your cell phone, television, and any music. Also, let others know in advance that you will be meditating and don't want to be disturbed unless there is an emergency.

**What you wear:** Whatever clothes you feel comfortable in work well with meditation.

**Your position:** Mindfulness meditation can be practiced in a variety of positions. Sitting in a supportive chair that promotes good posture, placing your hands on your legs so your arms are supported and relaxed, and having your feet uncrossed and flat on the ground is most accessible. However, you could also choose to sit on a cushion on the floor with legs crossed. Also, some mindfulness techniques are practiced standing or while moving or walking. Your intention with your posture is to promote being awake and alert. Therefore, laying down is not the ideal posture for meditating because you can be tempted to fall asleep. Ultimately, you should choose the best position to practice meditation because its most important that you are comfortable.

**What to do with your eyes:** Ideally, mindfulness meditation is practiced with the eyelids closed. However, if you prefer to keep your eyelids open, you can look down toward the floor a few feet in front of you while you keep your gaze soft and unfocused.

WHAT ARE THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF MINDFULNESS MEDITATION?



It's OK for you to have thoughts while meditating. It is the nature of the mind to think. That's its job! Know that all thoughts and feelings are welcome when practicing meditation.

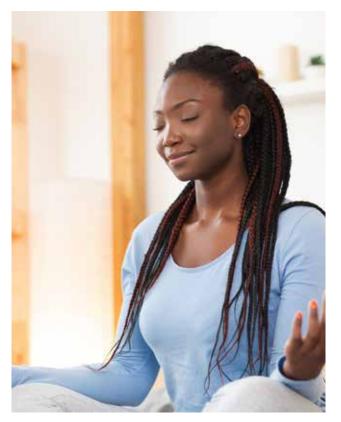
You do not try to force your mind to be quiet and stop thinking while meditating. Instead, you give it something to focus on so it has an anchor to keep your attention in the present moment. When you do this your mind will naturally settle.

Mindfulness meditation uses different objects to focus on. Since the breath is always with us in the present moment, it is often used as the focus of your attention. Also, your body only lives in the here and now, so it can also be used as the focus for your attention. You can pay attention to internal experiences within your body, such as feeling or imagining different body parts, or you can pay attention to experiences outside of your body, such as different senses like sound, sight, smell, taste, touch, and temperature.

Attention can be directed to focus on one object, like the breath, body, or something in the environment.

This form of mindfulness meditation is known as "focused attention," and is used when you are first learning. However, focused attention is also often used by many experienced meditators.

Another method of paying attention is allowing your focus to be on anything that comes into your awareness in the present moment. It provides a broad view of whatever is happening in the moment. This form of mindfulness meditation is known as open awareness or open monitoring, and although it may seem simple to do, it is considered an advanced form of practice.



It is important to know that while meditating your mind will become distracted and it will wander. You will often get lost in stories that you tell yourself. It is natural to lose your focus. It happens to everyone. When it does, simply recognize it and bring your attention back to the focus of your meditation.

Remember, you have the chance to redirect your focus again, and again and again. Paying attention is not a one-time event. When you bring your attention back to the focus of your meditation, you are doing what mindfulness is all about: being present.

The attitude to take when you lose your focus is to remain open to whatever is present in the moment. Do this by allowing yourself to not have any expectations or judge the meditation experience by saying, "this should be happening" or "this shouldn't be happening." Instead, kindly and gently, without trying too hard, redirect your attention back to the focus of your meditation.

Additionally, keep an attitude of curiosity by allowing yourself to explore and have a genuine interest in the experience. Being curious will help reduce judgement and guard against boredom or the desire to have a different experience.

Lastly, with meditation, it only works if you practice it consistently and do not give up. If you feel restless or think of something else you would rather do, you can make the choice to stay with the practice until the time that is set in the beginning is completed. This will help nurture commitment for your practice.

With mindfulness, there is the formal meditation practice and the practice of incorporating mindfulness by being present with your daily activities. Your meditation practice will help you cultivate being mindful in life.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR USING MINDFULNESS WHEN DEALING WITH VESTIBULAR DYSFUNCTION

Vestibular dysfunction causes physical symptoms (i.e., vertigo, dizziness, blurred vision with head movement, and/or imbalance) that can frequently be overwhelming. Feeling anxious or overwhelmed by physical sensations can worsen emotional symptoms, like fear, depression, frustration, and anger. When treating the physical consequences of vestibular dysfunction, the emotional consequences should be addressed, too. The best advice is to seek treatment from a psychologist. Additionally, formally practicing mindfulness meditation on a daily bases helps change your relationship to emotions, which can give you better perspective about the negative impact troubling emotions have.

Beyond psychological treatment and formal mindfulness practice for vestibular rehabilitation for symptoms related to vestibular dysfunction, physical exercise and mindfulness principles significantly help heal the body and mind. Some specific ways to incorporate mindfulness when dealing with the consequences of vestibular dysfunction include:

#### **BODY SCANS (AKA GROUNDING)**

This exercise helps train the brain to use information from the body for orientation (i.e., knowing where the body is in space), instead of using vision for this information. Vision can act as the dominant sense when there is vestibular dysfunction and vision shouldn't always be relied on because it can easily be fooled. For example, when you are sitting at a traffic light and the body is still, but you see movement in the environment from the passing traffic in the intersection. The brain has to figure out what sense to pay attention to. Your body sense tells the brain that the body is still, however the visual sense tells the brain the body is moving because it sees the passing cars. This mismatch of sensory information causes a conflict that has to be resolved. Training the brain to use the body sense can help resolve this conflict.

There are many ways to perform a body scan (AKA Grounding). Here are the instructions for one way:

While sitting comfortably in a supportive chair that has a back, rest your hands

comfortably in your lap, and allow your eyelids to close. However, if you prefer to keep your eyelids open, you can cap them by looking down toward the floor a few feet in front of you while you keep your gaze soft and unfocused.

With a gentle attention, slowly and steadily scan your body by starting at your feet.

Feel the pressure of your feet on the ground and your legs/ buttocks on the seat. GROUNDING TRAINS
THE BRAIN TO
USE INFORMATION
FROM THE BODY
FOR ORIENTATION,
INSTEAD OF USING
VISION FOR THIS
INFORMATION.

Find different points on your feet that are touching the ground as well as on the back of your leg/buttocks that are touching the seat. Note and experience how the ground and seat are solid and unmoving and how stable your feet and legs are by being connected to the surfaces and how you are also solid and unmoving with this connection.

Feel how your trunk is touching the chair back and is providing support. Also, explore and experience what is happening from the pelvis, to the abdomen, up through chest, and along back from the tailbone to the base of the neck.

Move your attention from your trunk to your arms---focus your attention first with your fingers, then your hands, and move up to your forearms and then your upper arms and shoulders.

Next note how your head is connected to your trunk and explore and experience your face and head.

Finish the scan by moving your attention back from your head, through your trunk, to your legs, and returning to your feet.

While doing this, know that you are supported and stable.

Allow your breathing to remain natural and relaxed throughout the body scan.

As you scan, simply be an observer, allowing yourself to experience whatever is present. If you notice that you become uncomfortable or distracted at any time, recognize it, allow yourself to gently and kindly let it go, then continue with the body scan. And, you can do this over and over again.

Also, if you find yourself trying too hard at any time, allow yourself to ease up and gently, with as little effort as possible, simply experience what is happening.

This can be practiced throughout the day, such as before or after an activity. Also, it is recommended to be practiced before and after different vestibular exercises and between sets of each exercise.

### BODY SCANS (AKA GROUNDING) THAT INTEGRATE ACTIVE RELAXATION

This exercise counteracts the "fight or flight" response (AKA stress response) that occurs from experiencing both physical and emotional stress by cultivating the relaxation response.

Perform a body scan, like the one above, with the addition of actively tightening and relaxing different muscles in the body. As you scan from the feet, legs, abdomen, back, hands, arms, shoulders, and face, tighten the muscles and hold for a couple of seconds. Then, let go of the contraction. After you let go of the contraction, allow yourself to experience the feeling of relaxation that occurs from the letting go. Slowly and steadily move up the body, tightening and letting the contraction go, while you allow your breath to remain natural and relaxed.

This can be practiced throughout the day, especially when you notice that you are experiencing stress. However, even when you don't experience stress, it can also be practiced to build resiliency against the stress response.

#### PRACTICE ABC'S

ABC's is an acronym that was coined by the author and that stands for Attention, Breath, Change, and either Savor or Support. This exercise has you practice paying attention to uncomfortable emotions and physical discomforts that are experienced throughout the day and then has you take action without judgement, with kindness, and curiosity. This exercise can help you

change the relationship with how you are experiencing what is happening.

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT MEDITATION

To overcome the misconceptions of meditation and have the best opportunity for success, proper training is essential. Meditation classes can be found online or they may be offered in local communities. Before signing up to take classes, make sure the instructor is qualified and research the meditation technique that is being taught. When anxiety, depression and/or trauma are so overwhelming that mindfulness meditation does not seem to work for you, look for a psychologist who is a qualified mindfulness meditation instructor to work with you.

#### **MORE RESOURCES**

Here are a few books to further your education about meditation:

- The Headspace Guide to Meditation and Mindfulness: How Mindfulness Can Change Your Life in Ten Minutes a Day by Andy Puddicombe
- Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World

- by Mark Williams and Danny Penman with Forward by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- Wherever You Go, There You Are by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Father of 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction' method)
- Loving-Kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness by Sharon Salzberg
- Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN by Tara Brach

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Farrell is a physical therapist, athletic trainer, and certified meditation and mindfulness instructor in South Florida. She has been specializing in vestibular and balance rehabilitation for adults with various neurological pathologies since 1999. For more information about her practice, visit **symmetryalliance. com**.

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## Relaxation Techniques

By Lisa Farrell, PT, PhD, ATC

Relaxation is an important part of overall health because it reduces the negative impacts of stress and improves self-confidence. Meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, and visualization are some of the techniques used to increase relaxation. Read more for tips about how to implement these relaxation techniques in your day to day.

#### **HOW DOES IT WORK?**

Relaxation reduces stress by:

- Decreasing heart rate
- Decreasing blood pressure
- Slowing respiratory rate
- Increasing blood flow to the major muscle groups
- Decreasing muscle tension
- Improving concentration
- Improving self confidence

#### TYPES OF RELAXATION TECHNIQUES

- Meditation: Focusing the mind on a word or phrase and letting go of other thoughts.
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation: Focus on slowly tensing then relaxing each muscle group.
- Visualization: Visualize yourself in a peaceful, relaxing place.
- Other relaxation techniques include hypnosis, massage, deep breathing, positive affirmations, mantras, aromatherapy, tai chi, yoga, art or other creative endeavors.

**TIPS** 



- Common symptoms of a Ménière's disease attack do not reflect the entire Relaxation takes practice! Even if you aren't conscious of feeling anything, the physiologic effects are still occurring.
- Each technique does not work for everyone. You may have to try several techniques before you find the best one for you.
- Don't force yourself to relax; let it happen naturally.
- Make yourself comfortable. Position yourself on chair with neck and back support, a firm bed, or a comfortable mat on the floor. Choose a position that you can maintain for at least 10 minutes.
- Relax in a guiet environment that is distraction-free.
- Relax periodically throughout the day. There are many apps that will remind you to meditate at intervals. Some (e.g. Insight Timer) will also show you how many other people are meditating at the same time, which can be motivating and make you feel part of a community.
- Set a timer so you don't have to worry about how much longer you have to meditate.
- Meditation is becoming mainstream. Don't feel embarrassed to talk about your meditation practice with friends and coworkers. The more open you are about it, the easier it will be to incorporate it into your life. You may even find that others have a meditation practice as well, or want to cultivate one.
- Seek out a group that you can meditate with. There are many local meditation groups that can be found through Meetup.com.
- Take a yoga or Tai chi class. Many studios offer "low-impact" classes or classes for people with balance problems (e.g. seniors, MS patients).

#### OTHER RESOURCES

There are many apps and YouTube videos that provide guided meditations, such as Calm App and Insight Timer.

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# Stress Management

By Lisa Farrell, PT, PhD, ATC

Stress management is an important part of minimizing the long-term negative health outcomes of chronic stress. Talking to a counselor or therapist can be a powerful way to improve stress management. There are also a number of exercises and practices that can be included in daily life to reduce the impacts of stress.

#### STRESS IS A PART OF LIFE

Stress is an automatic response for our body to protect itself from threats. This "fight or flight" sympathetic response is beneficial if you are in a lifethreatening situation or require a short-term force of motivation. But, if you experience stress over a prolonged period of time, it could become chronic. Chronic stress can have serious consequences for your brain, body, and mind. In this article, you will learn relaxation techniques to help you manage stress.

How we handle stress makes a big difference. Finding what works best for you is key to helping you reduce stress.

#### **RELAXATION CAN REDUCE STRESS BY:**

- Decreasing heart rate
- Decreasing blood pressure
- Slowing respiratory rate
- Increasing blood flow to the major muscle groups
- Decreasing muscle tension
- Improving concentration
- Improving self confidence



#### **RELAXATION TECHNIQUES**

**Meditation**: Focusing the mind on a word or phrase and letting go of other thoughts.

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation**: Focusing on slowly tensing then relaxing each muscle group.

**Visualization**: Imagining yourself in a peaceful, relaxing place.

#### **TIPS TO RELAX**

- Relaxation takes practice. Even if you aren't conscious of feeling anything, the physiologic effects are still occurring. Tune into what your body is telling you.
- Find the technique that works for you. You may have to try several techniques before you find the best one for you.
- Don't force it. Relaxation happens naturally.

## RELAXATION TAKES PRACTICE

Don't force yourself to relax, let it happen naturally.

- Get comfortable. Sit in a chair with neck and back support, or lay on a firm bed, or try a mat on the floor. Choose a position that you can maintain for at least 10 minutes.
- Shhhhhhhhh. Find a guiet environment that is distraction-free.
- Relax throughout the day. Some apps will remind you to meditate at intervals.
   For instance, Insight Timer (insighttimer.com) will also show you how many other people are meditating at the same time, which can be motivating and make you feel part of a community.
- Meditate with a group. There are many local meditation groups that can be found through Meetup.com.
- Try yoga or Tai chi. Many studios offer classes for beginners and/or classes for people with balance problems, including seniors and multiple sclerosis (MS) patients.
- Pray. A growing body of research suggests prayer helps some people cope better, heal faster from illness, and experience increased health benefits and well-being.
- Practice mindfulness. Adapt your attitude and approach to think successful and beneficial thoughts.

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## Suicide Resources

By the Vestibular Disorders Association

#### IT'S OK TO ASK FOR HELP

Vestibular disorders can be life-altering conditions, often causing significant disruptions to daily activities and quality of life. The challenges of living with these disorders can sometimes lead to feelings of depression and, in severe cases, thoughts of suicide. It's crucial to recognize that mental health support is an essential part of managing vestibular disorders.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

If you or a loved one are experiencing suicidal thoughts, seeking immediate professional help is vital.

#### SUICIDE PREVENTION HOTLINES

- United States & Canada Call the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, available 24/7 for anyone in emotional distress - simply dial 988 to connect with trained counselors who can provide support and resources. Opciones en español. Au Canada, des options en français sont également disponibles.
- United Kingdom: Call 111, open 24 hours every day. Click here for other suicide resources in the UK.
- Australia: Call Tripple Zero (000), or for 24 hour crisis support call 13 11 14 to reach Lifeline, a national charity to support Australians in emotional distress.
- France: Appel 3144, le numéro d'appel national pour la prévention du suicide, or 01 45 39 40 00 pour atteindre Suicide Écoute.
- Spain: El Ministerio de Sanidad promueve la Línea 024 para la atención de conductas suicidas. Disponible 24 horas al día, 7 días a la semana y gratuita.

#### **COUNSELING RESOURCES**

- Psychology Today: Articles plus a mental healthcare provider directory.
- Disability Plus: Counseling services in the UK.

Remember, you're not alone in this journey, and there are resources available to support both your physical and emotional well-being. Mental health professionals can provide valuable coping strategies and treatments to help navigate the complex emotions that may arise from living with a vestibular disorder.



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