

The Trauma of Being Dizzy: Addressing Fear, Avoidance, and Emotional Injury

For many people living with vestibular disorders, the physical symptoms of dizziness, vertigo, and imbalance are only part of the story. The emotional and psychological impact can be just as profound. At the Life Rebalanced Live virtual conference, a session titled “The Trauma of Being Dizzy: Addressing Fear, Avoidance & Emotional Injury” explored the complex relationship between chronic dizziness and emotional well-being.

The discussion unfolded in two parts. First, mental health professionals Dr. Joanna Wolfson, a psychologist, and Jen Warner, a licensed clinical social worker, discussed the ways vestibular disorders can trigger trauma responses and how counseling and trauma-informed care can help patients regain a sense of safety. In the second half, Careen Hanouche and Teena Hittie, both vestibular patients, shared their personal journeys navigating fear, isolation, and healing.

Together, their insights painted a powerful picture of how dizziness affects not only the body, but also the mind—and how recovery often involves addressing both.

When Dizziness Feels Traumatic

One of the central themes of the session was that the onset of dizziness can be deeply frightening, especially when it occurs suddenly or without explanation.



Many people describe their first severe episode of vertigo as feeling like a medical emergency. The room spins, the body becomes unstable, nausea may follow, and it can feel impossible to stand or move. Without an immediate explanation, people may fear they are having a stroke or dying.

This experience can leave a lasting psychological imprint.

Dr. Wolfson explained that traumatic stress often develops when a person's sense of safety and control is abruptly disrupted. Vestibular symptoms can create exactly that scenario. The body no longer behaves predictably, and everyday actions—walking, driving, turning the head—can suddenly trigger distress.

For some individuals, the trauma does not end with the initial episode. Instead, it can accumulate over time through repeated flare-ups, unpredictable symptoms, or difficult healthcare experiences.

The Emotional Toll of the Diagnostic Journey

Another major theme discussed by the speakers was the emotional impact of the diagnostic process.

Vestibular disorders are complex, and diagnosis is not always straightforward. Many patients see multiple providers before receiving an explanation for their symptoms. During that process, some individuals feel dismissed or misunderstood.

Being told that symptoms are “just vertigo” without further explanation—or being told the problem is simply anxiety—can leave patients feeling invalidated.

According to the speakers, these experiences can compound emotional injury. When people are already frightened by symptoms, feeling disbelieved can intensify stress and self-doubt.

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Patients may begin to question their own perceptions or feel reluctant to seek further care.

Trauma-informed healthcare emphasizes the importance of listening, validating, and educating patients so they feel understood rather than dismissed. Even when answers are not immediately available, empathy and clear communication can help restore trust.

Fear and the Cycle of Avoidance

One of the most common psychological patterns that develops after a vestibular event is the cycle of fear and avoidance.

After experiencing dizziness in certain environments—such as grocery stores, crowded spaces, or while driving—people may begin to avoid those situations to prevent symptoms. In the short term, avoidance can feel protective. But over time, it can gradually shrink a person's world.

Dr. Wolfson explained that the nervous system is designed to learn from perceived threats. When dizziness occurs in a particular context, the brain may label that situation as dangerous. The next time the person encounters a similar environment, anxiety may rise even before symptoms appear.

This anticipatory fear can lead to more avoidance, reinforcing the brain's belief that the environment is unsafe.

Jen Warner emphasized that gradual exposure and nervous system regulation are key elements of recovery. Rather than pushing too hard or withdrawing completely, patients often benefit from small, manageable steps that rebuild confidence.

These steps might include practicing short outings, using grounding techniques, or working with a therapist or vestibular rehabilitation specialist to slowly reintroduce challenging activities.

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The Nervous System and Trauma

A major focus of the professional discussion was the role of the nervous system in trauma and dizziness.

When people experience a threatening event, the nervous system may enter a heightened state of alert. In some cases, this response does not fully resolve, leaving the body in a persistent pattern of hypervigilance.

For vestibular patients, this can mean becoming extremely sensitive to internal sensations such as dizziness, imbalance, or motion. Even small fluctuations can trigger anxiety because the brain interprets them as signs of danger.

The speakers emphasized that this response is not a personal failing. It is a natural survival mechanism.

However, when the nervous system remains dysregulated, it can amplify symptoms and make recovery more difficult.

Therapeutic approaches that focus on calming the nervous system—such as mindfulness, breathing exercises, somatic awareness, and cognitive-behavioral strategies—can help patients gradually shift out of this heightened stress response.

Finding the Right Mental Health Support

The conversation also addressed the important role of mental health care in vestibular recovery.

Many patients initially hesitate to seek counseling because they fear their symptoms will be dismissed as “all in their head.” The speakers emphasized that addressing emotional trauma does not invalidate physical illness. Instead, it recognizes that the mind and body are deeply interconnected.

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Working with a therapist can help patients process the fear and grief that often accompany chronic illness.

The speakers suggested that patients look for mental health professionals who are open to understanding chronic medical conditions and who practice trauma-informed care. Approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based therapy, and other trauma-focused modalities may help individuals develop tools to manage anxiety and regain confidence.

Equally important is finding a provider who listens and validates the patient's experience.

Patient Voices: Living the Reality of Dizziness

The second half of the session shifted from clinical perspectives to lived experience, as vestibular patients Careen Hanouche and Teena Hittie shared their personal journeys.

Both panelists spoke openly about the emotional challenges of living with a condition that can disrupt nearly every aspect of daily life.

One common theme in their stories was the sense of isolation that often accompanies chronic dizziness. Because vestibular disorders are largely invisible, others may not understand the severity of the symptoms.

Simple activities—such as walking through a crowded store or riding in a car—can become overwhelming, yet from the outside the person may appear fine.

This disconnect can make it difficult to explain the condition to friends, family members, or coworkers.

Navigating Fear and Setbacks

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The panelists also described how fear can shape everyday decisions.

After experiencing severe dizziness, it is natural to worry about when the next episode might occur. For some patients, this fear leads to avoiding situations where help might not be available.

Both panelists discussed the emotional impact of setbacks, which can be especially discouraging after periods of improvement.

Recovery from vestibular disorders is rarely linear. Symptoms may fluctuate, and progress can sometimes feel slow.

However, the panelists emphasized that setbacks do not erase progress. Instead, they can be part of the longer process of healing.

Developing coping strategies—such as pacing activities, practicing self-compassion, and seeking supportive communities—can help patients navigate these challenges.

The Power of Validation and Community

One of the most powerful themes that emerged from the patient discussion was the importance of validation and connection.

Many vestibular patients spend months or years feeling misunderstood before they encounter others who truly understand their experience.

Support groups, patient organizations, and online communities can provide a space where individuals feel seen and heard.

Hearing others share similar struggles can reduce feelings of isolation and help normalize emotional responses to chronic illness.

For some patients, simply learning that their reactions—fear, frustration, grief—are common among others with vestibular disorders can be incredibly healing.

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Rebuilding Trust in the Body

Both the professional speakers and patient panelists emphasized the importance of rebuilding trust in the body.

When dizziness becomes unpredictable, it can feel as though the body has betrayed you. Activities that were once automatic suddenly require careful attention.

Recovery often involves slowly relearning that movement and everyday experiences can be safe again.

This process may include vestibular rehabilitation therapy, mental health counseling, gradual exposure to challenging environments, and consistent self-care practices.

Over time, many people find that their nervous systems begin to settle, and their confidence gradually returns.

A Message of Hope

While the session acknowledged the real trauma associated with dizziness, it also offered a message of hope.

Healing is possible—not only physically, but emotionally.

By recognizing the psychological impact of vestibular disorders and addressing both the mind and body, patients can move toward a more balanced and fulfilling life.

The speakers encouraged patients to seek support, whether through healthcare providers, mental health professionals, or patient communities.

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Living with dizziness can be profoundly challenging, but no one has to face that journey alone.

Key Takeaway

Vestibular disorders affect far more than balance. They can influence emotional health, relationships, identity, and daily functioning. Understanding the trauma associated with dizziness—and providing compassionate, trauma-informed care—can help patients move from fear and avoidance toward resilience and recovery.

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