



VESTIBULAR DISORDERS & MENTAL HEALTH

A Guide for Patients and Their Therapists

This handout is designed to help people living with vestibular disorders talk with a mental health professional about the emotional, cognitive, and relationship challenges that can accompany chronic dizziness, vertigo, imbalance, and other vestibular symptoms.

A Note for My Therapist

I am living with a vestibular disorder—a condition involving the balance system of the inner ear and brain. Vestibular disorders can cause symptoms such as dizziness, vertigo, imbalance, motion sensitivity, visual disturbances, and difficulty navigating busy environments.

Symptoms may fluctuate; some patients have a constant level of symptoms, while others experience acute, unpredictable spikes that largely recede. Vestibular disorders are difficult to diagnose, with the average patient seeing 15 providers during the course of their care. Often, the lack of a clear diagnosis and the time it takes to receive one can lead friends and family to believe the symptoms are imagined.

These conditions can also have significant emotional and cognitive effects. Anxiety, depression, grief, isolation, difficulty concentrating, changes in relationships, and loss of confidence or independence can all become part of the experience.

My physical symptoms are real. At the same time, my physical and emotional health can affect one another. For example, dizziness may cause anxiety, while anxiety and the body's "fight or flight" response can make dizziness feel worse. One of my goals in therapy is to learn how to manage this interaction without assuming that my physical symptoms are "just anxiety."

What I May Need Help With

Not every vestibular patient experiences all of these challenges. I have marked the areas that are most relevant to me.

Anxiety, Fear & Hypervigilance

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Living with dizziness and imbalance can make the world feel unpredictable. I may worry about falling, having a vertigo attack, becoming symptomatic in public, driving, traveling, being alone, or entering an environment that I am not sure I can tolerate.

After repeated episodes, I may become highly aware of sensations in my body or constantly watch for signs that my symptoms are getting worse. This can activate the body's fight-or-flight response and increase muscle tension, changes in breathing, and other physical sensations that can intensify dizziness.

I would like help with:

- ☐ Anxiety related to my vestibular symptoms
- ☐ Fear of falling
- ☐ Panic attacks or fear of having one
- ☐ Constantly monitoring my body for symptoms
- ☐ Fear of leaving home or being alone
- ☐ Fear of driving or traveling
- ☐ Avoiding places or activities because they might trigger symptoms
- ☐ Learning how to respond when symptoms suddenly increase
- ☐ Distinguishing between reasonable precautions and anxiety-driven avoidance
- ☐ Other: _____

Depression, Grief & Loss

A vestibular disorder can change many parts of life at once. I may not be able to work, exercise, socialize, travel, drive, care for my family, or participate in activities the way I once did.

These changes can create genuine feelings of loss and grief. I may feel sad, discouraged, frustrated, angry, helpless, or hopeless. I may also feel guilty because I cannot fulfill responsibilities I previously handled easily or because other people now have to help me.

I would like help with:

- ☐ Depression or persistent sadness
- ☐ Grieving the life or abilities I had before becoming ill
- ☐ Feeling hopeless about recovery or the future

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- ☐ Anger or frustration about my condition
- ☐ Guilt about needing help
- ☐ Loss of pleasure or interest in activities
- ☐ Changes in sleep, appetite, or motivation
- ☐ Adjusting to uncertainty about my health
- ☐ Finding meaning and enjoyment despite ongoing symptoms
- ☐ Other: _____

Isolation & Loneliness

Vestibular disorders can make socializing difficult. Restaurants, stores, crowds, concerts, sporting events, and other busy environments may worsen symptoms because of noise, movement, lighting, or visual stimulation.

I may also withdraw because I am afraid of becoming dizzy in public, because participating requires too much energy, or because other people do not understand what I am experiencing.

Because vestibular disorders are often invisible, I may look healthy even when I am struggling. This can leave me feeling misunderstood or alone.

I would like help with:

- ☐ Loneliness or social isolation
- ☐ Avoiding social activities
- ☐ Feeling that other people do not understand my illness
- ☐ Fear of experiencing symptoms in public
- ☐ Embarrassment about appearing unsteady or "drunk"
- ☐ Finding ways to stay connected when I cannot participate as I used to
- ☐ Asking friends and family for accommodations
- ☐ Rebuilding my social life gradually
- ☐ Other: _____

Brain Fog, Concentration & Cognitive Fatigue

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Vestibular disorders can affect more than balance. They can also affect attention, concentration, memory, processing speed, spatial awareness, and the ability to multitask.

When the vestibular system is not working normally, the brain may have to devote more attention and energy to staying oriented and balanced. This can leave fewer cognitive resources available for activities such as working, reading, carrying on a conversation, remembering information, making decisions, or completing several tasks at once.

Mental fatigue can therefore be a real part of vestibular illness—not simply a lack of motivation.

I may experience:

- ☐ Brain fog
- ☐ Difficulty concentrating
- ☐ Short-term memory problems
- ☐ Difficulty finding words
- ☐ Losing track of conversations
- ☐ Difficulty reading or using screens
- ☐ Trouble following directions or completing multi-step tasks
- ☐ Difficulty multitasking
- ☐ Slower thinking or information processing
- ☐ Difficulty making decisions
- ☐ Feeling mentally exhausted after relatively simple activities
- ☐ Becoming overwhelmed in noisy, crowded, or visually busy environments

I would like help developing strategies for:

Relationships & Communication

Chronic vestibular illness can change relationships.

I may need more help from a spouse, partner, family member, friend, or coworker than I did before. Other people may become frustrated because they cannot see or fully understand my symptoms. They may say things such as "You look fine," "I get dizzy too," or "You just need to stop worrying about it."

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At the same time, the people closest to me may be taking on additional responsibilities and experiencing stress of their own.

These changes can lead to misunderstandings, arguments, resentment, guilt, withdrawal, or loss of closeness at precisely the time when supportive relationships are especially important.

I would like help with:

- ☐ Explaining my condition and limitations to others
- ☐ Asking for help without feeling guilty
- ☐ Communicating my needs more clearly
- ☐ Setting boundaries
- ☐ Managing conflict with my spouse or partner
- ☐ Changes in family roles and responsibilities
- ☐ Feeling like a burden
- ☐ Maintaining friendships
- ☐ Rebuilding closeness and connection
- ☐ Helping loved ones understand my experience
- ☐ Including my partner or family member in a therapy session
- ☐ Other: _____

Independence, Identity & Self-Worth

Vestibular illness can affect how I see myself.

Before developing a vestibular disorder, I may have thought of myself as independent, capable, active, dependable, productive, or adventurous. Needing help with activities I once handled easily can challenge that identity.

Depending on other people may make me feel vulnerable. I may struggle with the idea that needing help means I am weak or less capable. Changes in my work, family role, independence, and abilities can also affect my confidence and self-worth.

I would like help with:

- ☐ Loss of independence

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- ☐ Changes in how I see myself
- ☐ Loss of confidence
- ☐ Feeling vulnerable
- ☐ Feeling like a burden
- ☐ Accepting help from others
- ☐ Changes in my work or family role
- ☐ Self-esteem or self-worth
- ☐ Accepting what I cannot currently control
- ☐ Building a meaningful life that accommodates my current abilities
- ☐ Other: _____

What I Want My Therapist to Understand

One of the most helpful things a therapist can do is recognize that physical vestibular symptoms and emotional responses can coexist and influence each other.

Anxiety can increase dizziness without being the original cause of the dizziness. Avoidance may provide short-term relief but can sometimes reinforce fear and make it harder to return to activities. Depression may develop in response to losses caused by chronic illness. Cognitive difficulties such as brain fog, poor concentration, and mental fatigue may also be associated with vestibular dysfunction.

Therapy can help me manage the psychological consequences of my condition while my medical and rehabilitation providers address its physical aspects.

What would be helpful from therapy

Depending on my individual needs, I may benefit from help with:

- Understanding my emotional responses to chronic illness
- Recognizing triggers for anxiety and stress
- Managing panic and the fight-or-flight response
- Developing relaxation and stress-management skills
- Challenging unhelpful or catastrophic thoughts without dismissing legitimate physical symptoms
- Gradually reducing fear-based avoidance when medically appropriate
- Coping with uncertainty and unpredictable symptoms
- Processing grief and loss

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- Managing depression
- Improving communication and relationships
- Asking for and accepting help
- Rebuilding confidence and independence
- Adjusting expectations while maintaining meaningful goals
- Developing self-compassion
- Finding ways to reconnect socially
- Accepting vulnerability without equating it with weakness
- Developing practical strategies for cognitive fatigue and brain fog

What I Most Want to Work on Right Now

The three biggest challenges my vestibular disorder is creating in my life are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Something I have stopped doing because of my symptoms or fear of my symptoms is:

Something I would like to be able to do again is:

One relationship that has been affected by my illness is:

Something I wish the people in my life understood about my experience is:

One thing that would make my life feel more manageable right now is:

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A Collaborative Approach

Mental health treatment does not replace appropriate medical care or vestibular rehabilitation. Ideally, psychological care is one part of a broader treatment plan.

For some patients, it may be helpful for a mental health professional to communicate—with the patient's permission—with their vestibular physician, vestibular rehabilitation therapist, primary care provider, or other members of the healthcare team.

The goal is not necessarily to eliminate every uncomfortable feeling or physical symptom. It is to help me develop the skills, confidence, flexibility, and support I need to live as fully as possible while managing a vestibular condition

About VeDA

The Vestibular Disorders Association (VeDA) provides trusted information, resources, and support for people affected by vestibular disorders and the healthcare professionals who care for them. Learn more: vestibular.org

This resource is intended for educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized medical or mental health advice.

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