

Mindfulness and Healthy Living with AF



Providing information, support and access to established,
new or innovative treatments for atrial fibrillation

Glossary

Arrhythmia Irregular or abnormal heartbeat which may be excessively fast or slow

Atrial Fibrillation (AF) A heart condition that causes an irregular and often abnormally fast heart rate

Body Scanning A type of meditation in which a person focuses on or scans parts of the body

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) A type of talking therapy which aims to improve mental health and reduce anxiety

Mindfulness A branch of meditation bringing focus into the present moment

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Provides national guidance and advice to improve health and social care

Physiology The way in which a part of the body functions

Psychological A term used to describe a condition relating to or arising from the mind or emotions (brain)

Yoga A physical, mental and spiritual practice. The word itself meaning 'union' or 'connection'

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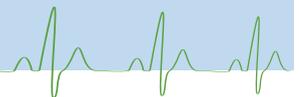
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Everyone experiences stress in life and sometimes this can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression. The medical community are increasingly beginning to understand that living with any long-term medical condition will add stress and worry. There are a number of therapies which can help to reduce stress and teach us how to manage stress and worry. In this booklet, we want to give you a flavour of the therapies which can help, and explain how the therapy addresses issues to help support you in living with your condition.

Alternative therapies

Far from being 'faddy' or 'new age', steps to promote emotional wellbeing can complement the more 'visible' forms of treatments prescribed by clinicians in the form of drugs. They can have a significant role to play in finding a holistic answer.

While research into some complementary therapies is inconclusive, some AF Association members have talked about the benefits they have received from yoga and acupuncture, and The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has acknowledged that some complementary therapies can be beneficial.

Some people have claimed that acupuncture can alleviate headaches, decrease pulse rate and is associated with a lower incidence of paroxysmal AF.

The benefits of yoga for AF

What is yoga?

Yoga is a traditional Hindu discipline including physical, mental and spiritual practices, which helps to integrate the mind, body and soul, and also improves physical health. There are many different types of yoga, but all focus on three main aspects: breathing, posture and meditation. Yoga is widely practised for health and relaxation purposes. It can help with physical aspects such as strength, flexibility and even weight loss, but it is also very powerful in helping with stress reduction, relaxation and focussing the mind on the present.



Why is yoga good for me?

It is said that heart rate is controlled by both the heart and the brain. Yoga is a practice which connects the heart and the brain, creating a perfect balance between the body and mind. It is widely recognised that yoga can reduce anxiety and stress. It is also suggested that it can improve cardiovascular function by decreasing the heart rate and blood pressure and can increase blood flow in the body. Regularly practising yoga can be a way of helping to relieve stress and anxiety, thereby helping you to cope with your condition. Yoga can help provide a powerful connection between the mind and the body, which can be very helpful for those with an arrhythmia.

As well as the physical effects and symptoms of AF, a lot of people struggle with anxiety, stress and depression. There is almost always a psychological adjustment following a diagnosis of AF, and unfortunately for many people, these thoughts and feelings can become overwhelming or difficult to overcome. Anxiety and stress can increase the heart rate, and increase the frequency and severity of AF episodes. It is widely accepted that yoga can dramatically reduce anxiety and stress, and in turn can help with your AF. Yoga can help provide a powerful connection between the mind and the body, which can be very helpful for those with a AF.

How can I practice or learn yoga?

With constant increasing popularity, yoga classes are becoming easier and easier to find. Most gyms and leisure centres provide classes that are suitable for beginners, intermediate and experts. Yoga DVDs are widely available for the ease of practising in your own home, and it is even possible to find many tutorials online. Although many forms of yoga are gentle and safe, some forms are more strenuous and may not be suitable for everyone.

Mindfulness

With modern life becoming increasingly busy, it is easy to stop noticing things around you, or how you might be feeling. This can lead to your emotions getting on top of you. Living with an arrhythmia can breed anxiety and worry, which can revolve around focusing heavily on the physical symptoms and fear that can be associated with these.

Mindfulness is a branch of meditation that has grown in popularity over the years, which involves concentrating on the senses.

Mindfulness is defined as 'paying attention to what is happening in the present moment (in the mind, body and external environment) with an attitude of curiosity and kindness'. It is often used as a therapeutic technique and has been found to alleviate symptoms of a variety of mental and physical disorders in a physical study.

Practising mindfulness meditation in your day-to-day life can allow you to respond calmly to symptoms of an arrhythmia when they arise, as it teaches you how to be aware of physical sensations in the body, without becoming overwhelmed by them. This technique can also help to prevent you from slipping into unhelpful and negative thinking patterns. Alleviating stress and worry in this way can support a reduction in the severity and frequency of arrhythmia episodes.

As well as reducing anxiety levels, mindfulness can lower your blood pressure, heart rate and increase your immune function.

Why not have a go?

Find a quiet and calm place to sit. The point of mindfulness is to be aware of the experiences you are having through your senses in the present moment. Try to focus on your breathing, paying attention to the physical sensation. It is easy for your mind to wander in thought but try to keep bringing it back to the present and the here and now. It is normal for thoughts to constantly flow through your mind but try to let them pass like rolling clouds. Close your eyes and try to concentrate on what you can smell, feel and hear right now.

Relaxation

In a world that is becoming increasingly fast paced and stressful, it has become more important than ever to be able to offer yourself some time to relax. Relaxation can help to combat stress, anxiety and worrying, by releasing physical and mental tension. It is also very beneficial to your mental health and well-being, helps you sleep better and improve your mood.

Stress can overwhelm your body, which in turn releases chemicals preparing your body for a 'fight or flight' response, even when it is not necessary. If you are a person who experiences stress on a daily basis, this can have a big impact on your body and physical health.

For some people, the thought of fitting relaxation into daily life may seem like you just don't have the time. However, it can take as little as five minutes per day to help reset your mind and outlook, and ease away the feeling of stress and anxiety.

Some relaxation tips include listening to music, lighting a candle or some incense, having a massage, deep breathing, going for a walk, dancing, reading a book or simply talking to a friend or settling down to watch a film. Deep breathing is a simple but very helpful relaxation technique, that can be done anywhere at any time.



Body Scanning

Body scanning is a well-known type of meditation or mindfulness that can be very beneficial for people with many different medical conditions, including AF. It is a method that is used for drawing attention to specific parts of the body, focusing on the sensations you may be experiencing as you work through the body. The aim of body scanning, is to notice and be aware of how each part of the body feels, without trying to change anything, or labelling any sensation as 'good' or 'bad'. Trying body scanning is a great way of learning to live with your condition, and learning that you can lead a happy and healthy life with AF.



To begin, find a comfortable place to lay down either on a bed or the floor, making sure it is calm and quiet. Closing your eyes may help you to focus. Allowing yourself as much time as you need for this, take some deep breaths in and out. You can start from your toes or the top of your head, working your way up or down the body, moving over each part of the body as you go. You may notice any sensations, such as tingling, pressure, tightness, or nothing at all. If you notice your mind wandering, do not worry, just notice that this is happening, and then gently bring back your attention.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a psychological approach whose effectiveness has been most clearly established in research trials, and for this reason it is recommended as the treatment of choice by NICE for a wide range of physical health conditions. Some more recent variants of CBT, especially those which incorporate ideas of mindfulness and acceptance are increasingly being advocated. More traditionally associated with eastern philosophies, these have been demonstrated to have a direct impact on our physiology, as well as a patient-reported quality of life.

AF can impose a considerable impact on an individual's quality of life. People with AF report significant levels of psychological distress about intrusive and disabling symptoms (fatigue, breathlessness, nausea, palpitations), losses and changes in roles (work, health, activities) and challenges to independence (relationships, mobility and sense of self). Many people with an arrhythmia experience troubling anxiety with worry and fear associated with their symptoms, some report panic and others experience depression. Whilst some people seem to push on in spite of this, others find it a frustrating and disabling condition. Furthermore, psychological distress has been found to have an effect on response to medical treatment and advice – people who are more distressed tend to respond less well to treatment.

CBT can be very effective in helping to address anxiety and depression related to various conditions. This talking therapy can help you understand the things that trigger and contribute to your experience of arrhythmia related emotional reactions, and to develop more adaptive ways of responding to your condition. There is evidence that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) results in improvements in emotional distress. CBT is available as an NHS treatment and is provided by Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT), or it may be available in your local cardiology service. There are free online resources dedicated to CBT and medication.

Mindfulness Based CBT (MBCBT)

Mindfulness based CBT was originally developed to support an individual's long-term recovery from depression. Mindfulness is defined as paying attention to what is happening in the present moment (in the mind, body and external environment) with an attitude of curiosity and kindness.

Meditation is one technique to practise this type of attention, in order to use it in day to day life. For people with AF and atrial flutter it can be useful to help notice calmly, and respond helpfully to symptoms. In emphasising that we can always deal with things as they come up in the moment, MBCBT can also help to resist getting drawn into unhelpful and distressing thought.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Acceptance and commitment therapy places great emphasis on the need to accept those difficulties and hardships which are out of our control, and which are an inevitable part of life. This does not mean giving up, but rather ACT feels that only when we accept this, can we stop throwing energy uselessly at what we cannot change. Then instead we can consciously choose to direct our precious and limited time and energy to things which will improve our quality of life, and give us purpose and meaning.

Exercising with AF

In an individual developing AF, the first steps in terms of exercising is a proper medical assessment. Once that has been achieved and appropriate medication has been prescribed, physicians would normally encourage an individual to return to full and normal activities and to maintain general cardiovascular fitness.

Exercise is an important component of a healthy lifestyle and exercising according to a paced approach at a level with which you are individually comfortable is sensible from a cardiovascular and emotional perspective. Prolonged periods of inactivity can be as harmful as overly strenuous exercise: moderation is the key.

The best thing to do, is to listen to your own body. While some people are comfortable with running marathons, others may feel better going for a slow walk. As we know with AF, nothing is black and white and the same rules do not apply to everybody. Exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle, but exercising at a level with which you are individually comfortable is very important from a cardiovascular perspective.

Walking regularly is an excellent way of keeping fit, as are tai-chi and Zumba. However, if you plan to try more strenuous exercise such as a sport or going to the gym, it is a good idea to discuss this with your clinician before starting.

Swimming is a great aerobic exercise. If you have been going for some time with no ill effects, it is probably fine for you. Humans are adapted for life on dry land, and immersing the body in water squeezes blood from the extremities towards the chest. Cold water can have the same effect, as it causes surface blood vessels to narrow as a natural response in order to conserve heat. This could have implications for blood pressure and AF.



Healthy eating and AF

If you are on Warfarin, you need to be mindful of the vitamin K content in food, because this has a knock-on effect on INR levels, and this in turn affects your dose of Warfarin. It is important to keep a healthy and relatively consistent diet. You should not try to change your International Normalised Ratio (INR) level by regularly altering your diet as this may lead to poor INR control.

A simple rule is that leafy green vegetables tend to be rich in vitamin K and root vegetables, fruits and cereals tend to be low in vitamin K. The key is to eat a sensible diet. Take the warfarin at approximately the same time each day. If you wish to make major changes to your diet or start taking a 'health supplement', discuss this with your doctor or the clinic which monitors your warfarin therapy.

In general, they will not restrict your choices but may wish to increase the level of monitoring for a period as you make changes. Once your blood levels are seen to be stable again, then you will return to your normal monitoring intervals.

For those who are not on Warfarin, there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to diet, because everybody's metabolism is different. However, we do find that the following things seem to be fairly common in triggering an AF episode:

- Large, carb heavy meals
- Alcohol, it is not recommended to exceed 14 units of alcohol per week. A small glass of wine is one unit, a half pint is one unit, and a measure of a spirit is one unit
- Caffeinated tea, coffee and fizzy drinks or energy drinks
- Chocolate, as it also contains caffeine
- Cut down on salt, especially if you suffer from high blood pressure
- Grapefruit has an enzyme which may interact with certain heart medications and may need to be avoided

If you are not sure what food or drink might be affecting your AF, it might be a good idea to keep a diary of triggers. It is a good idea to record things like whether the symptoms appeared after taking medication, if you had been feeling relaxed or panicked, the duration of the episode, and what you may have been doing on the lead up to your episode. Keeping such a diary can reveal previously unnoticed patterns and highlight things that you could avoid in the future.



The point of trigger avoidance is to only avoid them, if you discover that they are a trigger. In other words, don't deprive yourself of a coffee or glass of wine, if they do not trigger AF.

Healthy Living

Exercise is an important component of a healthy lifestyle, and exercising at a pace with which you are individually comfortable is sensible from a cardiovascular and emotional perspective. Prolonged periods of inactivity can be as harmful as overly strenuous exercise. Moderation is the key. The maintenance of normal weight, joint flexibility and muscular strength is important to global fitness.

Eating a healthy diet is good for reducing your risk of heart disease, but it can also be of benefit even if you already have a heart condition. Eating the right diet can help lower your blood pressure, reduce your cholesterol, help control your weight and reduce the risk of other conditions such as diabetes. Dehydration can contribute to symptoms of your condition. Staying hydrated is important as dehydration can affect the heart rhythm and increase your blood pressure.

The 5 elements approach to managing your condition

Water

Hydration - Achieving adequate hydration (water and salts) nutrition

Fire

Passions and interests - Relationships, inner-strength and value based living

Earth

Physical - Stretching and exercise, grounding exercises, mindful living, core-strength

Air

Calm - Sleep/ wake cycle, breathing, managing unhelpful thoughts, ways to switch off

Chemistry

Pharmacological -Support if needed



We all experience stress and at times it can feel overwhelming. If you think you need help, support or advice, then talk with your local health care professional for advice on how to access support and try some of the therapies we have outlined for you. For more information, contact AF Association at info@afa.org.uk

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Please remember that this publication provides general guidelines only. Individuals should always discuss their condition with a healthcare professional.

AF Association would like to thank all those who helped in the development and review of this publication.

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