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Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada Information Sheets are provided as an informational and educational tool and are not intended to replace the advice or instruction of a professional healthcare practitioner, or to substitute for medical care. We urge you to seek specific medical advice on individual matters of concern.

Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada is generously supported by individuals, corporations and employee groups. It is through the tireless dedication of donors that help is available for anyone affected by a brain tumour, including patients, survivors and their loved ones.

Ask the Expert Information Sheet

Mindful Matter: Mindfulness and the Brain Tumour Journey

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What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is about being fully present with your direct experience, whatever you are thinking, doing, or feeling – in the here and now. Mostly we are not aware, or fully with the experience we are having at the present moment. We can be doing an activity functioning on automatic, while worrying about something about to happen or thinking about something that occurred earlier.

When we practice being mindful, we do something and know that we are doing it (e.g. eating and really tasting the food, going for a walk and truly noticing nature around us, or turning on the radio and actually listening to the music). Many possibilities are offered through becoming more mindful; we may find more to appreciate in the ordinary experiences of our day.

Mindfulness also helps us to learn to respond differently to difficult situations. Instead of immediately reacting by imagining the worst, we learn to stop and come back to the direct experience we are having now. This changes our outlook and gives us an opportunity to find other ways of managing what is challenging us.

Mindfulness and Brain Tumours

A cognitive model of cancer distress can be described as a vicious cycle of anxious preoccupation¹. This model can certainly apply to anyone affected by a brain tumour, be it malignant or non-malignant. The circle starts with some general anxiety, which is often present in the experience of brain tumour patients. This anxiety triggers tension in the body that is felt as an ache or pain. Attention is drawn to these unpleasant, unwanted feelings and negative interpretations soon start forming (e.g. "It is getting worse?", "It might be a recurrence"). These undesirable thoughts are added to the feelings of anxiety, fueling the tension and physical pain. This leads to more negative interpretations, making them increasingly convincing.

Through practicing mindfulness, participants learn to notice and interpret the cycle of anxious preoccupation. Thoughts may still arise, anxiety may still be felt, and interpretations may even begin; however, it may be possible to recognize the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations for what they are – not necessarily true facts. This offers connection to present moment awareness and an opportunity to choose how to cope, rather than becoming overwhelmed by negative thoughts and feelings.

Psychological Implications

The sense of uncertainty in the face of a condition that could progress or recur at any time are common themes in the experience of people with brain tumours. Physical side effects from treatment (like weakness, fatigue, hair loss or nausea) may inhibit social interaction and contribute to depression. Post-treatment, some patients report an increase in anxiety as hospital visits, support, and opportunities to discuss their care become infrequent.

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you are **not** alone

Additional support, information and education offered by Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada:

Adult, Pediatric and Non-Malignant Brain Tumour Handbook available in English and French.

“A Friend in Hope” children’s storybook available in English and French.

20+ Adult Support Groups across Canada (in-person and virtual)

Toll-free information and support line

BrainWAVE Pediatric Support Program

Print BrainStorm Newsletter
Email Newsletters:
• E-BrainStorm
• Peace of Mind

“Grey Matters” Blog

All patient resources are available free-of-charge in Canada. Call 1-800-265-5106 or visit www.BrainTumour.ca for additional details and information.

Mindfulness presents an alternate way to cope other than attempting to escape from painful feelings or getting caught in unhelpful loops of thinking about them. Mindfulness offers new ways to relate to distress through learning to be present for our emotional experience as it is, each moment.

There is an increasing amount of research showing improvements in various issues like anxiety, depression, stress and illness-related fatigue across different mindfulness-based therapies²³⁴⁵.

Incorporating Mindfulness into Your Life

There are a number of ways to incorporate Mindfulness Practice into daily life while recovering from a brain tumour. Mindfulness training can be available through treatment facilities and workshops in your community. It is possible to begin short mindfulness practice at home through the use of self-help books and websites, designed to guide short mindfulness practice with scripts, audio and video. Some examples of short mindfulness practices include: The Pause, Coming to Breath, Body Scan, 3-Minute Breathing Space and performing routine activities mindfully.

Example of Short Mindfulness Practice — The Pause⁶

Begin by stopping what you are doing and asking yourself one of the following questions:

- What is going on for me right now?
- How am I feeling right now?

Keeping this very simple, you might want to adapt the question to make it your own.

Practicing this several times a day helps develop the habit of interrupting automatic reactivity, stopping and coming back.

Possible Applications for The Pause

- **Routine Activities.** We might choose to practice The Pause every time we do specific tasks such as mealtimes, while we open email, while washing up, or when we go out.
- **Specific Times.** We might choose to practice The Pause whenever we notice we are feeling speedy, anxious, stressed, irritable or upset.

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