

YOU'VE GOT THIS

Managing The Emotional
Challenges Of Incontinence



We're not going
to sugar coat
things...



MENTAL HEALTH IS ESSENTIAL HEALTH

We're not going to sugar coat things... If you're struggling with incontinence, you know better than anyone that your condition affects more than just your bladder or your pelvic floor – it affects your entire sense of who you are.

There are a lot of reasons why the mental health challenges that go along with incontinence can be so troubling: We've been conditioned our whole lives to think of accidents as embarrassing, and when you do have one, it's easy to feel helpless and childlike. Too many people blame themselves for something they genuinely have no control over, as if incontinence is a personal failing rather than a real medical condition.

And that doesn't even take into account the isolation so many experience. Fear of leaks can turn even the most social people into hermits, keeping them from friends and family and all the activities they used to love.

We're not saying all of this to get you down or make you feel any worse about yourself. Quite the contrary – we're saying this because we want you to know that we understand you, we hear you, and we have some very good news for you: There are tools and techniques to help you manage the emotional challenges that come along with your condition. With a little bit of effort and a willingness to take an active role in your healing, you can see real improvement in your self esteem and your outlook on life.



THE NEGATIVE FEEDBACK LOOP

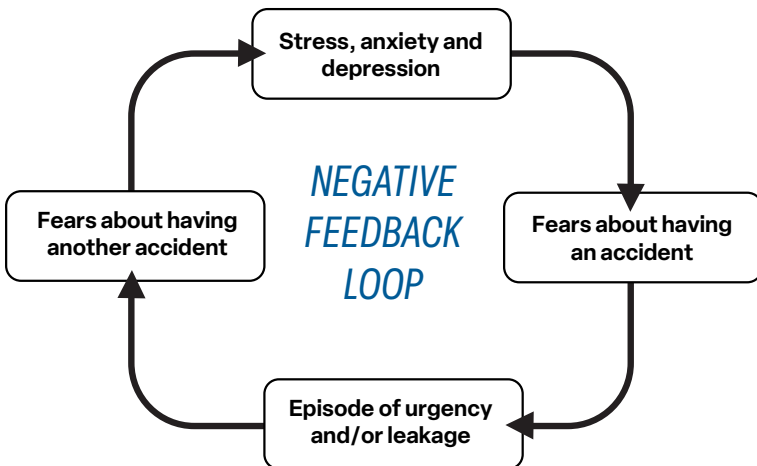
Stress, anxiety and depression aren't just side effects of incontinence – they may actually make your urgency and leakage worse. Don't take our word for it: One study of women in Norway found that those who had symptoms of anxiety or depression were up to two times more likely to develop urinary incontinence.



Why would that be? Researchers aren't entirely sure, but one thought is that stress and anxiety cause tension, and that tension can extend to your bladder and pelvic floor. More tension down there? More urgency and leakage.

Another idea is that stress can activate the natural fight-or-flight response we all experience, and that puts the nervous system on high alert. A hair-trigger nervous system can set off typical reflexes like bladder function much more easily.

Regardless of the specific cause, the end result is the same: Fears about having an accident can make it more likely that you'll have one. And having an accident can add to the fears that set things off in the first place. What you'll want to do is develop strategies to break that feedback loop and put yourself in a healthier mindset.





TECHNIQUES TO IMPROVE YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

The first thing you're going to want to do when it comes to addressing your emotional concerns is to personalize your plan. Remember that every patient is unique, and what you experience and how you manage your symptoms can be very different from the way others approach their condition.

It's also important that you don't let yourself get discouraged. Not every approach will work for every patient, and you should expect to try a number of different strategies until you find those that make a difference.

What follows is an introduction to some of the most common and effective techniques used by patients today. As you consider your own path forward, it's best to work hand-in-hand with an expert – either your general practitioner, your bladder/pelvic floor specialist, a mental health professional or a physical therapist – to keep your treatment plan coordinated and ensure that you're getting guidance from those in the know.

The Relaxation Response

Dr. Herbert Benson is the founder of Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute, and in the '60s and '70s, he focused his work on how relaxation techniques can be used to counter stress. He championed the idea that each of us can generate a "Relaxation Response," which is the opposite of the high-stress "flight-or-fight response."

When we enter a state of deep relaxation, we engage what's called the "parasympathetic nervous system." That's the part of our nervous system that's responsible for things like sexual arousal, urination, digestion and bowel movements. Through the use of any number of techniques, we can engage our parasympathetic nervous system to elicit the relaxation response, reducing stress and putting ourselves in a calmer frame of mind.

There's a wide variety of approaches you can try, including some that you're almost certainly familiar with. They include practicing mindfulness, deep breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, acupuncture and acupressure.

Try a number of different strategies until you find those that make a difference



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This is a simple, do-it-yourself technique where you focus on deep muscle relaxation by contracting isolated muscle groups one at a time, starting from your lower body and working your way up to your head. The goal is to use these contractions to switch your body and your mind to a more relaxed, peaceful state.



Here's how it works: Lie on your back with your eyes closed, in an environment without any distractions. Take a few deep breaths into your belly to put you into the mood to relax and begin the process of slowing down your body.

1. Firmly contract the muscles in your lower body, starting with the toes, then the feet, followed by the calves, then the thighs and finally your butt.
2. As you tighten each set of muscles, hold them for five seconds, visualizing the muscle and focusing on the tension you're creating.
3. Before you move to the next set of muscles, exhale slowly and relax the previous group for five to 10 seconds.
4. Repeat the same process for the muscles in your torso and upper body, in this order: Stomach/abdomen, fingers, hands, arms and shoulders.
5. Finally, do the same tension exercises for your neck, jaw and forehead.

Talk Therapy

A therapist can be an incredible ally in your journey towards better mental health. They're experts at helping you come to terms with challenges you're facing and develop approaches to process your emotions in a healthier manner. Because therapy can be a very intimate process, try to think of it as a relationship. You want a partner that you're comfortable and compatible with, so if you find that you aren't meshing well with the therapist you're seeing, don't be shy about seeking out someone who's a better fit. You'll be glad you did.



Cognitive-behavioral therapy

Also known as CBT, this is a type of talk therapy that is focused on helping you identify thoughts, attitudes and behaviors that may be creating issues for you and changing them for the better. Unlike traditional psychotherapy, which can be a longer-term process that includes examination of a broad range of

issues, CBD is a very results-oriented approach, with a goal of helping you identify specific strategies to generate the outcomes you're looking for. What that means for patients with incontinence is that CBT can be helpful for developing practical approaches to manage anxiety and stress, minimizing their ability to aggravate your condition.

Psychiatry

Either on their own or in coordination with a therapist, psychiatrists can be an invaluable source of support for those struggling with the mental health obstacles associated with incontinence. As medical doctors, they can prescribe drugs for anxiety, depression, stress and other issues, though it's important to make all of your doctors aware of the different medications you're taking or considering taking to make sure there are no negative interactions. Beyond medications, psychiatrists can also offer therapy, behavioral strategies, lifestyle changes and other approaches to improve your mental health.

Physical activity

Not only is exercise a great way to keep your body healthy and in shape, it's also a great stress reducer, which, as you know, can improve the symptoms of incontinence.

There are lots of ways to increase your physical activity, and they don't have to be intense to have an impact. Things like walking, biking, light jogging, swimming, aerobics, weightlifting or yoga are all great exercises to try. Make it more fun by incorporating friends or family. This not only makes it more of a social event, but it helps to ensure you'll stick with your workout plan if you know someone else is counting on you to join them.



Lifestyle Changes

The same lifestyle changes you make to address your physical challenges can also play a big role in addressing your emotional challenges, too. That shouldn't come as a surprise – when you make progress in reducing your symptoms, you begin to feel better about yourself and make it easier to reestablish relationships and resume activities that you might have been putting on hold. With that in mind, here's an overview of the most common lifestyle modifications that can also enhance your mental health:

- **Do your Kegels** – Regularly exercising your pelvic floor can strengthen the muscles that support the bladder and reduce the risk of incontinence.
- **Keep a Diary** – Tracking your bladder episodes can help you identify potential triggers and other factors that contribute to your incontinence. Be sure to share your diary with your doctor, because they may be able to see important patterns or signs that you might not recognize.

- **Watch your weight** – Excess weight can put additional strain on your bladder. Maintaining a healthy weight can contribute to greater bladder control.
- **Drink water** – Yes, it sounds counterproductive, but when you limit your water intake, you can concentrate your urine, and that’s irritating for the bladder. Most people find that 6 – 8 cups per day keeps them hydrated and staves off thirst; just be sure to watch that you don’t drink too much as bedtime approaches.
- **Adjust your diet** – Some foods like caffeine, alcohol and chocolate can be bladder irritants, increasing urgency and frequency. A bladder-friendly diet can make a real difference in symptom reduction.
- **Get proper prenatal and postnatal care** – Pregnancy is one of the most common causes of incontinence. Educating yourself on pelvic floor health during and after childbirth – particularly with the support of a pelvic floor physical therapist – can significantly improve your outlook for a leak-free experience.

YOUR COPING CHECKLIST

Incontinence is an awful lot to handle, isn’t it? Between concerns about accidents, managing care products, planning restroom visits, adjusting your schedule and dealing with the anxiety, stress and depression, it’s easy to become overwhelmed by your condition.


Take a moment to step back, catch your breath, and remind yourself that by taking things in small steps, one at a time, you can get back some of the control you’ve been missing and put some of that chaos to rest. Here’s a quick checklist of things to do that can help you feel more centered, calm and collected:

- **Don’t beat yourself up** – A lot of us take incontinence as if it’s a personal or a moral failure. It’s not. It’s a medical condition the same as any other.
- **Remember that you’re in good company** – It might feel like you’re the only one dealing with your challenges, but nearly 40 million people struggle with incontinence, too. You are not alone.
- **Find a virtual support network** – You don’t have to go through this alone, but that doesn’t mean you have to expose yourself to others before you’re ready. Because it can be hard to open up to people face-to-face, consider an online support community like the National Association for Continence’s message boards (www.nafc.org/message-boards). You can remain completely anonymous while connecting with others dealing with the very same issues that you are.
- **Find a real-world support network** – When you’re ready – and only when you’re ready – it can be a real relief to reach out to those you can count on for emotional support. That might be friends or family, therapists or counselors, members of the clergy – anyone you trust to be understanding, patient and kind.
- **Communicate your needs** – Sometimes, what we need most is practical help. Don’t be ashamed to let those you rely on know how they can be of service.

- **Breathe** – Feel how all that stress is tightening your chest? Feel how your jaw is clenched or your heart is racing? Take a moment for a deep breath. And again. It's a mini-meditation moment, and there's rarely a wrong time for one.
- **Advocate for yourself** – Women can be great at putting everybody else's needs first, sometimes to their own detriment. When you're dealing with the challenges of incontinence, it's important that you make your needs known. You deserve to be respected and listened to.
- **Be proactive** – A problem like incontinence doesn't solve itself. Make it your mission to take active steps in your care journey. Reach out to physicians. Ask for all your treatment options. Keep on trying, even when some approaches fail. There is something out there that will work for you, but you won't find it with a passive approach.
- **Be patient** – It's not realistic to expect that your problems will be solved quickly. Managing incontinence is a journey with lots of trial and error. Try to keep a positive attitude, appreciate progress when you make it, and accept setbacks when they happen. Persistence is the key to getting back the things that incontinence has taken from you.

You're Not Alone

A 2019 survey from NAFC found that 90% of patients reported feeling isolated, depressed or hopeless. That's not surprising, but an active approach and a strong support network can help you overcome those emotional challenges.



Don't give up! You're not defined by your condition.

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION



FOR CONTINENCE

For more information regarding mental health & Incontinence, please visit www.nafc.org.

Getting Back to Normal

Discuss your expectations and methods of postoperative bladder drainage before surgery

- There are generally no dietary restrictions following the procedure
- Most people can usually resume light activities immediately
- It is typically recommended that patients avoid heavy lifting and strenuous exercise for two months and sexual intercourse for about one month
- Some individuals who have non-strenuous employment may be able to go back to work between one and two weeks, but it is generally advised not to plan on an early return to work or to schedule any important activities in the first two weeks
- Discomfort might interfere with potential plans



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To view informative slide presentations on Surgical Treatment for Urinary Incontinence, please visit www.nafc.org

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