

Workshop 10: Understanding Health Beliefs

The aim of this worksheet is to enable you to identify beliefs and ideas you and people around you may have about your condition and the importance of accurate information about the condition.

This worksheet will help you:

- Consider the role unhelpful beliefs have in increasing disability
- Identify ideas and beliefs you may have about your condition
- Reflect on how your own beliefs, and those of people close to you, may affect you and the choices you make
- Identify sources of correct information

The way we think about our health condition and what we believe about the things we can and can't do has a great effect on us and the way we behave. The way other people think and behave around us also affects us. Sometimes we don't even realise this is happening.

We can think about how this may work by considering the two different situations below:

Jim lives with angina. He believes that when he feels the pain of angina this is similar to a mini heart attack and is causing damage to his heart, so he avoids any activity or exertion that may trigger his angina. This reluctance to exercise leads to his heart becoming more out of condition and leads to a worsening of his angina, meaning he can do less and less before the pain is triggered.

Bob lives with exactly the same degree of angina but he believes and knows that angina is not a heart attack and so he won't die or damage his heart. He also knows that any exercise he does will improve the blood flow to his heart and so he gradually increases the amount of exercise and activity he does and over time he can do more and more before the angina pain is triggered.

What are your thoughts about these 2 situations? Who is likely to feel more disabled by his angina?

Some beliefs are unhelpful and these can have a powerful effect on the way we behave and the choices we make. For example:

I feel OK so my blood pressure/blood sugar can't be high

You need to pull yourself together

Pain/breathlessness is my body's way of making me stop

If I rest more it will get better

Exercise makes me worse

I'll wait until I get really bad before I do anything

If I keep taking tablets they'll stop working

I feel OK so I don't need to go for a check-up

What unhelpful beliefs have you had about your own condition in the past?

What beliefs have you heard from other people?

What have you seen or read which may be unhelpful?

How did these beliefs affect you?

Unhelpful beliefs come from many different places. They might come from magazines, friends, family members or the internet. We may not even know where these ideas originate - they can be rather like 'old wives tales' which we take as truth. Medical knowledge is constantly developing too, so what was thought to be true in the past may not be so now. In the 1950's people believed that smoking cigarettes was good for you, very few people would believe this now.

We cannot just assume that what we believe, or what other people tell us, is correct. We need to be able to check our facts and use trusted sources of information.

Where might we find these trusted sources of information?

Information prescriptions

NHS Choices website

Societies - Diabetes UK, MS Society, British Heart Foundation

Pharmacist

Some websites

Health Education Department

Over the next week you may want to spend some time thinking about what you know about your health condition and identify a source of reliable information, you may even want to make this your goal for the week.