

Mental Health and SCI in a COVID-19 climate

Issue 3, August 2020

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The experience of disability

Disability is a major life changing factor and each and every person experiences it differently. There is no rule that determines how one should feel after acquiring disability.

Disability after Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) requires adjustment of one's identity. Harp (2009, p. 163) highlights that "a traumatic injury or diagnosis of disease that

suddenly makes you a member of disabled community is a shock to your sense of self".

Many newly disabled people have no clear sense on how it feels to function in a wheelchair and feel like they will need to depend on others to help them. As such, "regardless of how well-adjusted, mature, or emotionally strong you are, **powerful emo-**

tions are a natural reaction to a crisis and are part of the recovery and adaptive process" (Harp, 2009, p. 171).

SCI patients go through 5 stages of grief namely, *denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.*

Thabitha Nkuna, Social worker

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Covid-19 effect on SCI individuals

According to the International Spinal Cord Society, persons with spinal cord injury are more vulnerable than others, and with lockdown restrictions and the current protective meas-

ures in place, the physical, psychological and social needs of these people are significant.

Feelings of anxiety and loneliness are bound to increase all the more during

Covid-19, and therefore we as healthcare professionals, should be ready to refer to the appropriate MDT member when necessary.

Spinal cord injuries and mental health in a time of Covid-19

Our mental health is often neglected or put on the back burner, and now possibly even more so in a time where a global pandemic is threatening our physical health. Most of us as well as our governments are attempting to protect our physical health through several measures, though as a result could unintentionally negatively impact upon our mental health. We are currently seeing more and more people reporting feeling lonely and or socially isolated. Studies are showing us the long-term negative impacts of prolonged periods of loneliness and social isolation have, not only our mental health but also on our physical health as well.

Many who have had spinal cord injuries often experience social isolation and feelings of social exclusion at the best of times. However, in the current climate visits for those in hospital are few and far between. Within this context one does have the advantage of support and social engagement

with trained therapists and fellow patients.

For those of us not currently admitted, the question might be, how can we combat feelings of loneliness and social isolation in a time of social distancing?

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Firstly it is important for one to be mindful, to experience the emotions associated and to realize that you are not alone in this feeling and that it is perfectly normal for us all to experience these emotions at some point. After having given attention to these emotions, it is important to act.

Actively set time aside to

check-in with friends and loved ones; make time for activities which you used to enjoy; maintain healthy sleeping patterns and adhere to good sleep hygiene; stay active and exercise regularly and last but certainly not least try to keep a balanced diet.

While being an incredibly daunting time, it is also a time of great opportunity and potential. Many of the activities which we enjoyed have moved onto online formats. Book clubs, quizzes and lots of possibilities to up skill ourselves with online courses, now exist. Should life feel as though it is too much and too heavy, there are several free telephonic counselling organisations and many psychologists have migrated their practices into tele-therapy formats. Please try to be mindful that these are extraordinary times and try to practice self-kindness.

Barry Viljoen Clinical Psychologist

A patient's experience

A SCI patient was asked about his experience as a patient in a rehab hospital during Covid-19:

1. What changed the most in the rehab after Covid-19? **Movement within the hospital was limited, for example he was not able to go into the gym in order to exercise and socialize with patients. Group therapy was stopped, and so interactions with other patients and therapists was limited.**
2. What was the hardest part for you in rehab during Covid-19? **“Sitting in the ward, in the same place, the whole day without going anywhere, no movement. That was very hard, because you think, think, think, think, think, think, think, think, you know”.**
3. What was your opinion on the PPE? **“I didn't have a problem with the PPE, I coped very well with it because it was a precaution to protect everyone. Sometimes I didn't recognise some people, but I loved the PPE because it was protecting us”.**
4. Did you have increased anxiety that you might get Covid-19? **The patient reported that the anxiety was definitely there. He also explained that he was aware that some healthcare workers were not able to socially distance while travelling to work on public transport.**

Mental health effects of Covid-19 on health care workers



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**** COMPLIMENTARY SERVICE**

Mental health care for COVID-19 healthcare workers:

<https://covidcaregauteng.co.za>



Healthcare workers are affected too!

Mental health resources

Other available resources for patients and health care workers:

- SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group) (24 hour): 0800 456 789 (tel); 31393 (sms)
- SADAG suicide crisis line (24hour): 0800 567 567
- SADAG (WhatsApp support): 076 882 2775
- Lifeline Crisis (24hour): 0861 322 322
- Lifeline Counselling (WhatsApp): 065 989 9238
- Gift of the Givers toll-free care-line: 0800 786 786
- Substance Use & Abuse hotline: 0800 121 314

Final word:

Dear SASCA members

We hope that you are well and thank you for your support.

We hope that you have enjoyed and benefited greatly from this month's issue of the SASCA newsletter. Since it is International Spinal Cord Injury day on 5th September 2020, we would love to hear what your hospitals are doing to raise awareness for SCI and disability! Please share what you have done, so that we can encourage our SCI community in our next newsletter.

All feedback regarding SCI day and any other feedback, may be sent to this email address: sascanewsletter@gmail.com

We are here to serve our SCI community– patients and clients, families and SCI health care workers.

Regards,

SASCA committee

Important dates:

- 5th September: SCI day; Theme for 2020: "Covid-19 and SCI: Staying well"
- 1-5 September 2020– Virtual ISCOS annual scientific meeting
- 4-6 November 2021– SASCA congress



**Keep safe,
everyone!**

