The Importance of Talking About COPD

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Tips for Talking About COPD

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is not just about the physical symptoms. Sure, the shortness of breath, coughing and fatigue are problematic, but the range of symptoms extends farther.

Living with COPD is stressful, and over time, the physical health stressors morph into mental health stressors.

Many with COPD begin to develop symptoms of depression and anxiety. You begin to experience changes in mood, concentration, irritability, levels of sleep and appetite. You begin to feel less self-esteem and self-worth.

If left untreated, COPD paired with depression and anxiety work to separate you from the people in your life. You begin to find reasons not to speak to friends, family and other supports by creating irrational excuses.

Benefits of Communication

No matter the level of your symptoms or how you see yourself, people need other people. You are no different. Communicating with others can provide you with amazing positives. The benefits of communication include:

- **Allowing people to know your thoughts and feelings.** When you communicate good things happen. Letting people know what you are thinking and how you are feeling gives them the opportunity to better understand your actions and motivation.
- **Allowing people to know how they can help.** If you do not know what people can do to help you, tell them that — you don't need to have all the answers. You only need to have the openness to permit assistance.
- **Allowing you to help others.** Helping others gives your confidence and self-worth a much needed boost as you feel productive and capable.
- **Allowing you to help yourself.** Sometimes expressing your opinions or points-of-view changes the way you perceive them. Freeing your ideas from your mind gives you the ability to process the content in new ways. You may be able to solve problems like never before just from the act of discussing them with trusted support.

There is no better type of communication than assertive communication. Someone using assertive communication is able to express themselves openly and honestly while respecting self and others.

Active Listening

What you say during a conversation is important, but it represents a tiny portion of the overall communication. Using even the highest level assertive communication will be meaningless if you do not listen to what the other person has to say.

No one wants to have a conversation with a bad listener and no one wants to be friends with someone who does not understand them, so listen up and listen well. Here's how:

- **Be quiet.** Often when people wish to give you data or their opinion of an event or a situation, they want you to be quiet. Interrupting or finishing their sentences will distract you and the person speaking.
- **Be prepared.** Being prepared to listen means getting yourself in an appropriate environment mentally and physically. Having a quiet place with limited disruptions will aid the conversation. If you are having trouble paying attention mentally, tell the other person — perhaps they have a suggestion or can reschedule the conversation for another time.
- **Be reflective.** Reduce the odds of misunderstandings by repeating and reflecting what the other person is saying to you. Ask questions to double check anything that you are confused about and paraphrase the main points of what they are trying to tell you.
- **Be understanding.** Rather than filtering the information through your perspective, try to understand the other person's point of view. At this stage, it is not about being right or wrong, it is about gathering information from a source.

Checking Your Non-Verbals

What you say is part of the conversation. What you hear is part of the conversation. Non-verbals make up the rest.

Non-verbals include aspects of your body language, your tone and rate of speech. Besides yielding better communication, using desired non-verbals is a way to show someone you care for them and value them. It's not only what you say but how you say it.

There is a two-step process to improve your nonverbal communication:

Decrease Your Negative Non-Verbals

Think about people you have poor relationships with and consider what they do while you are speaking. How do they sound? How do they look? What are they looking at?

Sitting slumped over in a chair, looking at the floor, mumbling under your breath and having a frown on your face will change the way others perceive the information that you are trying to give them.

Paying attention to others will help you pay attention to yourself. Using a mirror to track your negative non-verbals can give you a lot of information.

Ask your supports how you present yourself in social situations. If your behaviors are triggered by discomfort, anxiety or depression, work to address those issues directly.

Increase Your Positive Non-Verbals

Now that you have pictured negative non-verbals, think of someone that is a great public speaker or someone that is a natural entertainer. What are they doing with their hands? How is their body language and the tone of their voice?

Begin by mirroring these behaviors to test out how they feel. If it is much different from your normal manner, it will be slightly uncomfortable for a time. Keep working at it.

Something as simple as appropriate eye contact will completely change how your conversation will be received.

Having improved communication with a range of people in your life can pay dividends now and years from now. Assertive communication is a necessary start while active listening skills and great non-verbals complete the communication picture.

Communication takes practice, but if you’re not getting better, you’re getting worse. Start getting better today.