Overcoming Psychological COPD Challenges

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

Where’s Your Head At?

There are many challenges in dealing with COPD, but one I see too many struggle with is their frame of mind. While we can put all the other systems in place like support networks and exercise regimes, we still have to have the strength of mind – a type of mental fitness – to cope with the ongoing physical challenges we confront.

'Poor Me'

One of the most destructive psychological challenges I see people with chronic illness battle with is what I call 'poor me' syndrome. You don’t have to look too hard on COPD social media sites and forums to find people who have decided that it's too hard and they’re never getting better, so why bother?

Don't get me wrong; I know it’s terrifying to be faced with not knowing where your next breath is coming from, but in life there are people who are proactive with there health and there are people who are inactive with their health – much of who how each type deals with challenges comes down to their mindset.

It might sound harsh, but I'm sure I'm not the only one who finds it frustrating. If there's something in your life you’re not happy with, isn't it better to work on it rather than complain about it?

Which one of these questions applies to you?

- *I walk 10 feet and I’m out of breath – how can I exercise?*
- *I walk 10 feet and I’m out of breath – how can I fix this?*

If the second question applies to you, then your mindset is going in the right direction. If you’re more familiar with the first question, then there's some work to be done.

Mind Over Matter

Being a COPD patient with a lung function less than 30% gives me a pretty good idea of how it feels to have severe breathing restrictions. As possibly the only person with this condition to still actively compete in triathlon and Ironman races, I have learnt some very valuable skills to help cope with COPD.

June 10, 2014 was the day I realized just how much your mind can control outcomes in your life. It was the day of Cairns Ironman, and a challenging day in more ways than one. I'd been training solidly, six days a week for ten months, and had completed the Melbourne Ironman just 12 weeks prior. I was mentally fried when I arrived in Cairns and struggling to get my head right for the race – not good only four days out.

The weather in Cairns was wet and windy, and while I can cope with the rain, swimming, cycling and running into a strong wind takes its toll on someone already competing against the odds. On race morning I woke to a howling

wind and torrential rain and my immediate thought was, *I hope they cancel the race.* No such luck.

I drove to the race venue in horrible weather and walked through mud just to get to the race start. Once there I was faced with a 3.8km swim in an angry ocean, a 180km ride over a hilly bike course in wind and rain, and a 42.2 km run over a flooded run course.

Next page: breaking up your goals into manageable chunks, and choosing to make a change.

Breaking Up Your Goals

To say I was having a few problems getting my head right would be an understatement, but that was the challenge and that was what had to be done. To dissect the process I went through to complete the race would take longer than we have time for here, but in a nutshell it was a matter of breaking the challenge up into manageable sections that I could deal with – physically *and* mentally.

This approach is applicable to everyday life and one I advise people to use when it comes to managing their COPD. I've talked before about COPD being individual and everyone having their own COPD challenges, but regardless of your limitations, they can be improved by applying this simple processes.

However difficult the task ahead of you, it can be made simpler by breaking down the process. Complete the tasks in manageable stages, one at a time, day in, day out, and build a routine that's consistent and aims to increase your activity.

There's a phrase I tell people to remember when they're struggling: "The body will do what the mind tells it to!"

Life has many challenges and being mentally strong enough to navigate through the ups and downs is a valuable tool. I have no doubt that the training and races I have completed in the time before and after I was diagnosed have shaped the way I deal with life's challenges. We all have those moments in life when we are battling to breathe when exercising or even simply walking up stairs, but pushing through those times rather than giving in is what makes us stronger.

I was recently told by a fellow patient that someone needs to bottle that magic potion I take so all people with COPD could do the exercise I do. Well, there's no magic potion: it's just hard work and a desire to live as normal life as possible that drives me.

There are many COPD patients who are active and living a great quality of life and they do this the same way I do.

If You Don't like the World You're Living in, Change Your World

Doctors, patients, carers and respiratory specialist all over the world are advocating more and more the great benefits of exercise for people with respiratory disease.

You can choose to sit on the couch and be inactive, which often leads to obesity, shortness of breath and other health issues, both physiological and psychological. Or you can change your world – be active, eat healthy and become COPD active. You don't have to run marathons, you just have to start moving and little by little your world will change.

Wouldn't you like your family and friends to admire you rather than feel sorry for you? Pity should never be something you seek, as it will feed a sense of worthlessness and consolidate the feeling that everything's too hard.

Remember the golden rule for changing your life is consistency. Consistency will soon be replaced by habit – good habits – and then you're well on your way to a better life.

Join the club, become COPD active; your body and mind will thank you.