

Psychosocial Issues in Spinal Cord Injury

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Learning Objectives

- 1—Identify common emotional and social challenges facing those with spinal cord injury
- 2—Describe steps that patients, families, and professionals can take to address psychosocial issues related to spinal cord injury

Grieving the Loss

- While grief is often thought of as a process limited to situations involving death, any major life change can provoke a grief reaction.
- Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross theorized a grief process in her landmark book, “On Death and Dying.”
- Her framework involved 5 stages of grief.
- Non-linear. People can also skip stages entirely, or “get stuck”

The Five Stages of Grief

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Denial

Anger

Bargaining

Depression

Acceptance

Denial

- Defense mechanism to help survive shock of massive change
- Patients and families may not “hear” facts presented
- Focus on reflecting content of what patients say, plus their feelings

Anger

- “Why me?”
- Blame self, others, God
- Allow patients and families to express this anger. Continue to use reflection of their thoughts and feelings

Bargaining

- Can involve “making a deal” with a higher power
 - Negotiating to avoid pain
- May involve “what if?” statements, guilt
- Struggle to find meaning in event
- Provide emotional support

Depression

- Stage most commonly associated with grief
- Hopelessness, emptiness, overwhelmed
- Suicidal or passive thoughts of death may be expressed
- Continue active listening and consider added mental health support

Acceptance

- Does not mean patient/family is OK with what has happened
- Acceptance of new reality in life
- Emotions stabilize

Dealing With New Reality

- Changes in independence
 - self-care, feeling like a “burden”
 - mobility
- Change in roles
 - in family
 - at work
 - in social group
- Change in emotional needs

Assisting in Clearing Barriers

- Many patients, families, and even some medical professionals hold inaccurate or incomplete views regarding advances in spinal cord injury rehab
- Team approach to care involves family, friends, physicians, nurses, physical and occupational therapists, mental health professionals, recreation therapists, vocational rehab counselors, social workers and case managers, orthotists, pastoral care, equipment specialists, and community advocates and supports, etc.

Assisting in Clearing Barriers (cont'd)

- Perceived environmental barriers can affect resilience and self-efficacy, which can limit participation in general
- Education about resources is key, along with access assistance and follow through
- Engagement coping facilitates psychosocial adaptation
 - active coping
 - planning
 - positive reinterpretation

- Locatelli, SM, Etingen, B., Miskevics, S., & LaVela, S.L. (2017). Effect of the environment on participation in spinal cord injuries/disorders: The mediating impact of resilience, grief, and self-efficacy. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 62(3):334-344
- Livneh, H. & Martz, E. (2014). Coping strategies and resources as predictors of psychosocial adaptation among people with spinal cord injury. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 59(3): 329-339.

