

State Spinal Cord Injury Service – Psychosocial Strategy

Psychosocial Aspects of Spinal Cord Injury

Psychosocial factors that impact on rehabilitation outcomes should be integrated into all SCI services. Clients should have lifelong access to psychosocial support services. When this approach begins in the earliest possible phase of SCI rehabilitation, clients will have far better long term outcomes.

Important to remember that;

- Adjustment and coping to a SCI is a complex process
- Individuals respond differently to SCI
- A range of interacting factors impact on the adjustment process. These include medical/physical, psychological, social, environmental and community factors.
- Assisting adjustment is the responsibility of all those working with the individual

Acute phase:

In the acute phase an individual will be attempting to make sense of their SCI, and thinking about its implications for their view of themselves and their role within their family, work and social network.

- **What are some of the important psychosocial considerations for ongoing adjustment to SCI (acute/rehab/community)?** To convey a sense of safety & that initial trauma is over.
- To normalise the individual's emotions and help them make sense of the experience.
- Being mindful of previous history of emotional distress, discussing fears and being mindful of signs of distress.
- Being aware of the client's preferred coping style and the social, environmental and biological resources that they have.
- Supporting the individual in gaining an understanding of diagnosis and prognosis, the extent of their injury and the consequences of SCI and the process of rehab in a timely manner.
- The concerns of the client and their family should be at the centre of care
- Treating team should provide emotional and social support to client and family through active listening, helping the client to feel heard and understood.
- Promote self management & enhance positive self appraisal (self-efficacy)
- Make efforts to improve privacy for client where possible
- Promote opportunities for client to contribute to decision making.
- The treating team should have awareness of what constitutes an appropriate response to distress and adjustment issues e.g. suicidal ideation, despair, denial.- frequently these responses often form an important contribution to the process of adjustment.

CASE STUDY 1: Acute Setting

Max is a 61-year-old gentleman who sustained a T5 injury on his property. He is married with 4 children (aged 15-21 yrs). Max has always been very active, participating in many sports and also with his children. As a farmer he recently experienced drought, fires and flood on his land and is experiencing a degree of financial stress. He was previously a sea merchant and also served in Vietnam and Rhodesia. Max has always been very independent, in control/and with a high degree of self-efficacy. He reports good family support and excellent communication with his wife to whom he is very close. Max is complaining of neuropathic pain and has been reluctant to attend OT at this stage. He has been attending physio.

Max is 2 weeks post injury and has been told that he is likely to be a paraplegic for the rest of his life. Max denies and difficulty but his mood appears low and he has expressed a lack of will to live on occasions, particularly late at night when in pain. He appears constantly angry. He is hostile to nursing and therapy staff and frustrated if his needs are not met immediately.

Questions to think about when interacting with Max:

1. Are there any pre-injury factors that you think may impact Max's progress / adjustment in the acute phase of his rehabilitation? Such as:
 - emotional history & previous vulnerabilities (previous depression or trauma?)
 - beliefs about self, the world (as a man, a father, a soldier)
 - coping style
 - beliefs about disability
 - environmental factors
 - biological factors
 - social support
2. What are some of the personality traits that may contribute to the way Max interacts on the ward?
3. How do you think Max has coped with previous life stressors?
4. How might you promote Max's understanding of his injury?

Psychosocial Issues that may arise for Allied Health and Nursing in their interactions:

Nursing Perspectives:

1. Max is having bowel accidents and is getting very distressed and angry, often swearing.
 - a. How might Max be feeling?
 - b. How could this be best managed?
 - c. What could you say and do?
2. Max has been making inappropriate comments about sex during showering.
 - a. Why do you think this might be?
 - b. How could you manage this situation?

Occupational therapy Issues:

1. You would like to discuss selecting a commode so that Max is able to shower more comfortably on the ward however Max insists on wanting to discuss his pain and his inability to get out of bed yet.
 - a. What do you think is happening for Max?
 - b. How do you think Max is experiencing his SCI?
 - c. What might you do to encourage Max to participate in his rehabilitation?

2. Max explains that he is not attending OT because he can either not get up or he has other things that he must complete
 - a. What is Max communicating here? Is Max coping? What can you do to promote help Max cope better?
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Physiotherapy therapy Issues:

1. Max is fixated on the on physical aspect of SCI and not keen to attend any other therapies. He does not engage too much with the physios but just gets on with his therapy.
 - a. Taking into account the above questions, what do you think Max is experiencing at the moment and how might you deal with him?
 2. In the gym Max avoids certain equipment and exercises at times stating that it is too painful. However, his symptoms are not consistent with what you know about neuropathic pain in this situation.
 - a. How might you deal with this situation?
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Social Work Issues:

1. Max is often negative or critical about multiple issues
 - a. What do you think is going on for Max emotionally?
2. Max's wife has mentioned that Max has been avoiding taking part in family activities and she is worried about this.
 - a. What do you think you could communicate to the wife and how might you help Max to engage with his family?