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of Ontario

*Committed to improving
the lives of people
living with lymphedema*

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Ask the Expert

Managing the emotional challenges of
Lymphedema

By Elizabeth McMahon

I have lymphedema. I think I know how I got it post cancer and now I am constantly worrying about all the things I can and can't do. It has certainly curtailed my social and physical activities. Will I ever feel normal again?

Yes, you will – but it will be a 'New Normal'.

Go to books, reputable websites, and your healthcare team for the latest information about lymphedema. Replace constant worry with facts. Notice about what improves, or worsens, *your* lymphedema.

Helpful worry is fact-based, focuses on likely problems, motivates you to plan to reduce problems or cope with them, and decreases once you have a plan.

Reduce *unhelpful* constant worry by devoting 20 minutes/day to writing down every worry. When worry pops up at other times, postpone it to your 'worry time'.

Challenge worries with facts:

Ask: "How likely is this really?" If worries are unrealistic or unlikely, face your fears despite worry.

Ask: "How would I cope?" If worries are realistic and likely, plan how you'll avoid, lessen, or cope. Then let worry go.

Accept uncertainty. Certainty is impossible; but a satisfying life with lymphedema IS possible.

The hardest thing about my lymphedema is the stares and questions I attract when I am out in public and wear my compression garment. What can I tell people that is polite, informative but takes the focus off of myself?

Decide in advance what you will say. Rehearse until it flows smoothly and comfortably.

"Thank you for your concern. It's nothing to worry about."

"I have a swelling condition and this helps control it."

"I have lymphedema which is a swelling condition that often happens after cancer treatment. This garment helps keep the swelling down. Would you like to know more?"

People respond to your manner, and your manner reflects how you perceive yourself. Let your best self shine forth by focusing on aspects of yourself that create feelings of pride, confidence, and comfort. Be friendly and approachable. Stand erect, but relaxed, head up; smile and nod often; make eye contact; use a confident, friendly voice tone.

You can be a source of knowledge and inspiration to others.



Elizabeth McMahon, PhD is a clinical psychologist and author (*Overcoming the Emotional Challenges of Lymphedema, Living Well with Lymphedema, Lymphedema Caregiver's Guide, and Voices of Lymphedema*) who serves on the advisory board of www.LymphNotes.com an online resource for lymphedema patients and therapists.