



THE SIMON FOUNDATION
FOR CONTINENCE

fact sheet

PROMOTING CONTINENCE – CHANGING LIVES

INCONTINENCE AND EMOTIONS

There are an estimated 33 million Americans who have some degree of incontinence. People who cope daily with misbehaving bladders (and/or bowels) experience a wide range of emotions, but chief among them for most is fear – the fear of being wet or of smelling in public. Feelings associated with incontinence such as shame, embarrassment, guilt or the desire to isolate oneself lead to changes in self-image and self-confidence. The reason for focusing on your feelings is to help you understand, control, and plan for your own reactions and the reactions of others to incontinence.

Unfortunately many of us learn these feelings when we are very young. The process of toilet training is of great importance in most cultures. Therefore, almost every person reading this Fact Sheet has either said or heard another adult say to a child “good boy” or “bad girl!” depending on the success the child is having learning bladder control. Given our society’s fixation on becoming skillful in controlling this little muscle at an early age, is it any wonder that losing control of one’s bladder or bowel as an adult is an emotional issue?

Common Feelings

Research has shown that the amount of leakage a person experiences is not related to the degree of emotional distress they may feel about incontinence, nor do the feelings a person experiences about incontinence correlate to their age, the length of time their bladder (and/or bowel) has been misbehaving, or the cause of the leakage. Depression, irritability, anxiety, worry, frustration, and anger are all common responses of individuals who often spend their days constantly toilet-centered in

thoughts and activities.

Perhaps the worst affect is the feeling of shame. Shame is defined as a painful emotion which is caused by a consciousness of guilt, shortcoming or impropriety. Feelings of shame often contribute to a sense that “If I am not in control of my body, then what else is beyond my ability to control?” The reactions of others, especially spouse and children can add to one’s feelings of shame.



Sometimes individuals do not even recognize how much incontinence has affected their lives until they realize how many activities they have stopped doing (such as going to church, the movies, or even playing cards with friends) due to fear of not having quick access to a bathroom.

Increasing Your Coping Skills

It is doubtful that anyone will ever claim that owning a misbehaving bladder is not embarrassing at times. However, there are many occasions for discomfort and embarrassment in the life (spilling coffee on a co-worker, trailing toilet paper stick to one’s shoe from a public restroom, tripping over one’s microphone cord while giving a speech – these all certainly rank right up there), but most of us do manage to cope (perhaps somewhat red-faced) and move on.

Coping is something we do every day, but don’t notice unless a problem

continues. Today there is much that can be done about incontinence, and new treatments are in development, but the fact remains that millions of people will not be completely free from incontinence symptoms anytime soon. Therefore learning some new coping skills so that incontinence will not take up unnecessary emotional energy may be in order.

It is helpful to split coping skills into two categories: strategies for coping with the dread of what might happen, and strategies surrounding actual loss of bladder (and/or bowel) control... an “accident”, “event”, or “incident”. Even what name we choose may affect our perspective and feelings about incontinence.

Dealing With Dread

The strategies for change surrounding the psychological problems of living with the fear include reducing tension, refuting irrational ideas, learning assertiveness training, and practicing thought-stopping techniques to avoid concentrating on unwanted, detrimental thoughts.

The body responds to anxiety-provoking thoughts and events with muscle tension, which in turn increases the person’s anxiety. Learning deep muscle relaxation helps reduce tension and thus anxiety. Ask your healthcare provider to help you learn progressive relaxation exercises.

Everyone engages in self-talk, your internal thought language. If self-talk is accurate and in touch with reality, then you function well, but if it is irrational and untrue then you experience anxiety and emotional disturbance. In other words, you feel what you think, but you can learn to improve how you converse with yourself! At worst with incontinence you can say I will experience incontinence, regret, and

continued on back

INCONTINENCE AND EMOTIONS

annoyance – not anxiety, depression, and rage.

Refuting irrational ideas starts by identifying what you say to yourself that is inaccurate. You can do this by determining if there is any rational, logical support for this idea and if not, then once you've compared the self-talk with rational thinking, remember to substitute a new, alternative statement to yourself. For instance, select the idea that you wish to change (e.g. "It is not fair that I have to suffer with incontinence"). Then substitute another such as "Life is not fair. Life is a sequence of events, some of which are inconvenient and painful. If problems occur, it is up to me to solve them. No one is special."

Being assertive about your legitimate rights, but not aggressive, also helps to reduce anxiety and depression. Some of these include the right to: put yourself first at times; change your mind; protest unfair treatment; ask for help or emotional support; not to justify yourself to others; and not to respond to people's questions.

A concerted effort of step-by-step work is often necessary for people who have not learned to be assertive. A social worker or health psychologist who is familiar with incontinence can help by discussing how you can practice and become more comfortable advocating for the things you need to be and feel more comfortable.

Dealing With Incontinence In Public

For many people whose incontinence cannot be completely cured, it is often not a matter of it but when the thing we have so dreaded (being exposed in public) will come about. This is definitely not an event that we were trained to deal with by either our families or our schools, nor is there a social etiquette book on the subject. No one will ever say incontinence is

an easy thing to cope with, but the stress can at least be minimized for most people.

One way to plan your strategy for when your bladder or bowel misbehaves in public is to re-evaluate the term "accident" – the name most of us give this event. Dictionary definitions of accident include: "an unforeseen or unplanned event" and "resulting from carelessness, unawareness, ignorance...." Loss of bladder control does not result from carelessness or unawareness or ignorance. In fact for most people the first time they are wet in public is not even an unforeseen event, but rather something they have dreaded.

So perhaps we need to remove the word "accident" from our vocabulary and begin to construct ways of thinking which incorporate the motto of "Be Prepared." There is no right or wrong way to be prepared. The real test is how well does your coping mechanism work for you.

Some of the choices available to help you be prepared include: knowing the routes to the closest bathroom; carrying extra clothing in a stylish bag; telling others close to you that your bladder or bowel has been a bit unruly (perhaps even explaining to them how they may assist you, so that they too are prepared); and planning ahead what you intend to do yourself. Statements such as "I can only do my best"; "I am afraid because I decided to be. I can decide not to be"; or "I've survived this and worse before" are not only true, but saying these statements to yourself can also help you avoid any negative self-talk.

Another area to examine is what incontinence management product you choose to wear for protection. For instance, are you using a feminine hygiene product? If so, it's important to know that there are not constructed

to absorb urine. For the best security and protection, it is important to choose high quality absorbent products designed for the level of incontinence you are experiencing.

Many men are not aware that there are now products specifically designed for the male anatomy. If what you currently use has already let you down then perhaps looking to see what else is available may be an additional strategy to explore.

It is possible that what you really need is more protection to feel confident. If so, what keeps you from "upgrading"? Perhaps you associate some products with a little leakage and others with incontinence, a term you don't feel you wish to use regarding your own situation.

It is important to remember that your interpretations of the situation, predications, and self-evaluation are what create emotions. So better coping means realistic statements of just how unruly your bladder really is.

Humor As A Coping Mechanism

Some readers may think that incontinence is not a symptom in which one finds humor. But somewhere hidden in any of the circumstances life hands us is a little bit of fun, so why not going looking for it? Humor, after all, is a coping mechanism which works well for many individuals.

When Things Don't Come Easy

Like all of us, you may find that creating new more rewarding ways of behaving does not come easy. If the stress surrounding incontinence continues in your life, consider asking for professional help. A licensed clinical psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker experienced in medical psychology, and interested in and knowledgeable about incontinence, would be a good place to start. There is help. There is hope.

The Simon Foundation is a not-for-profit educational organization dedicated to helping people with incontinence.

For a sample copy of **The Informer**, send \$1.00 with a business-size envelope self-addressed to:

Post Office Box 815, Wilmette, Illinois 60091

Phone 847.864.3913 Fax 847.864.9758 www.simonfoundation.org

This Fact Sheet has been made possible by an educational grant from
SCA Personal Care, the makers of TENA® and TENA® Serenity® Incontinence Management Products
www.tena-usa.com