

Focussing on the important things in life can help



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Graeme discusses how thinking about our values can help people live with long-term conditions

Being diagnosed with and living with cardiomyopathy are huge challenges which can knock us off track and make us feel vulnerable, frightened and fed up.

Some of the symptoms which cardiomyopathy can lead to, such as shortness of breath and fatigue, can leave us feeling hugely frustrated.

If we have had to stop doing things we really enjoyed or which were important to us, we may feel we are no longer the person we used to be.

This can be extremely painful and can lead to a downward spiral of frustration and increasingly low mood.

Although there is no easy way to deal with this pain and loss, one way of helping bring back a sense of direction is to identify what really matters to us. In other words, what are our values?

Values help us to focus on what is really important to us, whether or not we are living with a heart condition. Values act like a compass bearing or signpost, helping to keep us on the right path, in the right direction, whatever difficult thoughts, feelings and sensations we have to live with.

In order to get in touch with your own values, try to imagine what you would like your friends and family to say about you if they gathered together at a big celebration, such as for a big birthday. If they were trying to sum up the things you stand for, what would you want them to say?

What kind of husband, wife or partner do you want to be? What sort of parent, grandparent, friend? How do you want to be in your working life or leisure? What other things do you care deeply about, such as nature, spirituality, your health or learning?

When reflecting on the questions above, people sometimes fall into the trap of giving a fantasy answer, such as 'I'd like people to say I'd won the lottery!' or 'I'd want them to say I had been cured of all my health problems'.

While we might wish that could happen, they don't really help us get to our values and may just reinforce feelings of frustration and even envy. Try to be truthful to who you really are, with all the strengths you have as well as all the difficulties you face.

When thinking about values, look out too for a tendency to get drawn into what you think you ought to say. Be kind to yourself rather than getting hooked into rules, with words such as must, ought, should, good, bad. Open yourself up to be guided by what you hold dear in your heart.

The box below provides some examples of values which you might find useful but feel free to come up with your own. Remember values are about what really matters to you.

If cardiomyopathy is getting in the way of your goals, it is even more important to be clear about your values.

Clinical psychologist Ray Owen has written two excellent books (*Facing the Storm* and *Living with the Enemy*), which focus on ways of coping with the stresses of long-term conditions.

He uses the example of someone who was desperate to teach his son to fish but was unable to, due to worsening ill health. This was a painful loss which was difficult for him to deal with. However, he was able to think about why this activity was so important to him, and what were the essential ingredients of this goal.

In other words, what values did this activity reflect? In his case, the values were something to do with spending time with

his son, teaching him something he could take into adult life and creating some lasting memories for him.

By unpacking what really mattered about this, he was able to come up with an alternative goal of teaching his son to play chess, which was not his first choice but was achievable and which still mattered to him. It reflected his values.

So whether or not things are tough for you at the moment, and your cardiomyopathy, or life in general, is making it difficult for you to do what you'd like to do, spend some time really trying to get in touch with your values.

And then see if you can unbundle what you would like to do into some small actions which are meaningful and important to you.

Is holding on to the past keeping you looking frustratedly in the rear view mirror instead of looking at the road ahead, however tricky it may be?

Is there something you could do in the next day or so, even just a small step, which would connect with your values?

If you can start to take some small steps in the direction which is right for you, it can have a ripple effect which leaves you feeling more fulfilled and more true to yourself.

Examples of values

Being loyal
Caring for the people I love
Being creative
Being kind and compassionate towards myself and others
Leading others
Looking after my health
Living in a spiritual or religious way
Learning new things
Being emotionally close to people I care about
Nurturing others/ helping others develop
Being in contact with nature
Being generous, sharing and giving, to myself and others
Another value which is not here?

What's important to you (tick)