

Navigating your well-being: A supported self management guide for long term conditions



My Health – Living Well With Long Term Conditions

Hello, and welcome to today's session, which will focus on navigating wellbeing when living with a long-term condition.

We have around **30 minutes** together today, and our highest priority is to ensure this time feels supportive, valuable, and respectful of your energy.

Together, we will look at compassionate, practical ways to build on your current routines and gently weave simple strategies into your day. We want to keep things easy, engaging, and inspiring so you can begin making comfortable, positive changes.

Everything we discuss today is evidence-based and rooted in our clinical practice. We are here specifically to support people living with fluctuating, long-term conditions. We know the lived reality of these conditions. We understand the unpredictability, the sometimes profound exhaustion, the grief for your former levels of functioning, and the frustration that often comes with the healthcare journey. Our goal today is not to 'fix' your symptoms. Instead, we want to support your wellbeing, help you manage your health, and give you back a sense of agency within your current limitations.

1

Weathering The Storm



Living with a long-term condition can sometimes feel like being caught in the middle of a storm, surrounded by difficult thoughts, emotions, and challenges. Throughout today's group, we're not trying to get rid of difficult thoughts and feelings, but instead learn how to anchor yourself in the present moment so that you are less likely to be swept away by them. By doing this, you can better support your wellbeing and focus your energy on what matters most to you.

You may be experiencing a sense of loss, such as the loss of your previous roles, abilities, independence, or even a sense of who you were before your condition. You may find yourself worrying about the future and what life might look like moving forward.

You might feel frustrated about your journey so far, including challenges accessing healthcare, support, or a diagnosis.

You may feel frustrated about other people's lack of understanding of your condition.

Perhaps you have lost trust in your body and feel uncertain about what it can do from one day to the next.

Many people also worry about finances, employment, or navigating the benefits system.

Getting caught up in difficult thoughts and feelings can be exhausting and can use up valuable energy that is already in short supply.

Many of these challenges are outside of our control. The aim of today's group is to help you develop practical skills to cope more effectively with difficult thoughts and feelings when they arise.

Throughout today's group, we will explore:

The connection between the mind, body, and nervous system

How small, meaningful changes can support wellbeing

Acceptance and the importance of meaningful activity

And finally practical ways to stay grounded in the present moment

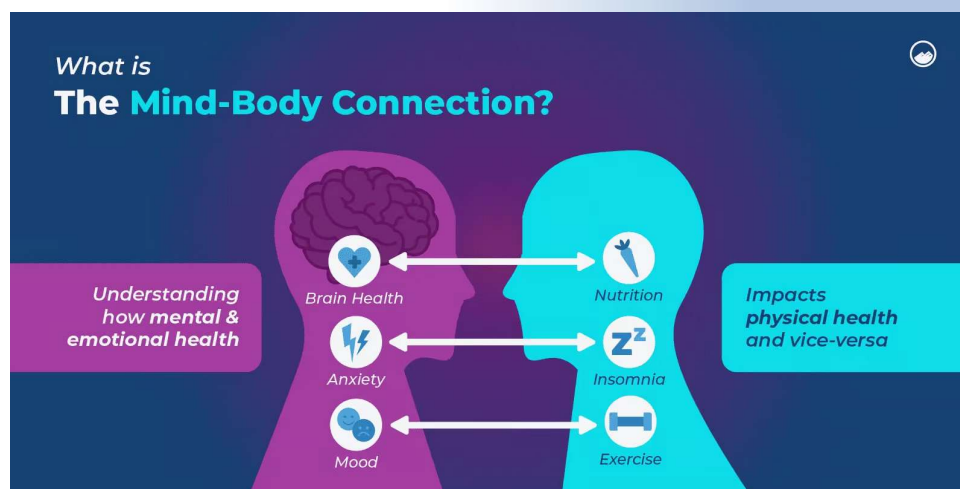
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What Is The Mind-Body Connection?



So why are we talking about wellbeing?

Let's take a moment to think about the mind-body connection.



So, what are the effects of this emotional storm on the body?

Our **mind** (thoughts, feelings, and emotions) and our **body** (physical health and bodily sensations) are closely connected.

The **nervous system** acts as the communication link between the two. It is constantly responding to what is happening around us, as well as what is happening within us.

This means that, in just the same way that our physical symptoms can have an impact on our thoughts and feelings, our mental state can have an impact on our physical symptoms. For example, anxious thoughts about your health and what might happen in the future can cause your body to respond physically by tensing your muscles and increasing your heart rate. This is what is called your 'fight or flight' response, which is how our nervous system tells our body to respond to potential threats.

We can also use this to our advantage. We can use physical techniques such as breathing exercises, or mental techniques such as compassionate self-talk to help regulate our nervous system, and we will cover some of these in more detail

through this session.

Looking after both your **physical health** and your **emotional wellbeing** can help support a healthier mind-body connection.

Take a moment to reflect:

Are you giving as much attention to your emotional wellbeing as you are to your physical health?

3

Understanding Wellbeing With Long Term Conditions

One small change in one wellbeing area can positively affect other domains.

Focus on realistic, compassionate goals.

"Wellbeing and illness can coexist. Even in the presence of health challenges, people can find strength, meaning, connection, and moments of joy."



So, if both your physical and mental wellbeing is being challenged right now, where do you start? On this slide we're going to look at what wellbeing actually means when you are living with a long term condition.

It is completely understandable to feel that wellbeing is only possible if your symptoms disappear. But when symptoms persist, that all-or-nothing thinking can leave us feeling hopeless. Today, we want to challenge that idea by introducing **The Eight Dimensions of Wellness**.

This model shows us that wellbeing is multi-dimensional. Your physical health may be significantly impacted right now, but there are many other vital areas of your life that we can still support and nurture:

- **Emotional:** Coping effectively with life's challenges and creating satisfying relationships.
- **Physical:** Recognizing your unique needs for gentle physical movement, restful sleep, and nutrition.
- **Financial:** Finding satisfaction and peace of mind with your current and future financial situations.
- **Social:** Building a sense of connection and a dependable support system that works for you.
- **Occupational:** Finding personal satisfaction and enrichment from your work, volunteering, or daily activities.

- **Environmental:** Cultivating pleasant, accessible environments that actively support your well-being.
- **Intellectual:** Identifying your creative abilities and finding safe ways to expand your knowledge and skills.
- **Spiritual:** Expanding your sense of purpose and finding deep meaning in life.

Supported self-management is never about ignoring your physical symptoms. Instead, it is about widening our focus to look at areas where small, meaningful changes *are* actually possible.

For example, you might adjust your room to reduce sensory overload, improving your **environmental** wellness. You might read or listen to something brief that sparks your interest, boosting your **intellectual** wellness. Because all eight areas are interconnected, a small, positive change in just one dimension can have a positive ripple effect on your overall health.

This approach is rooted in the biopsychosocial model used across the NHS.

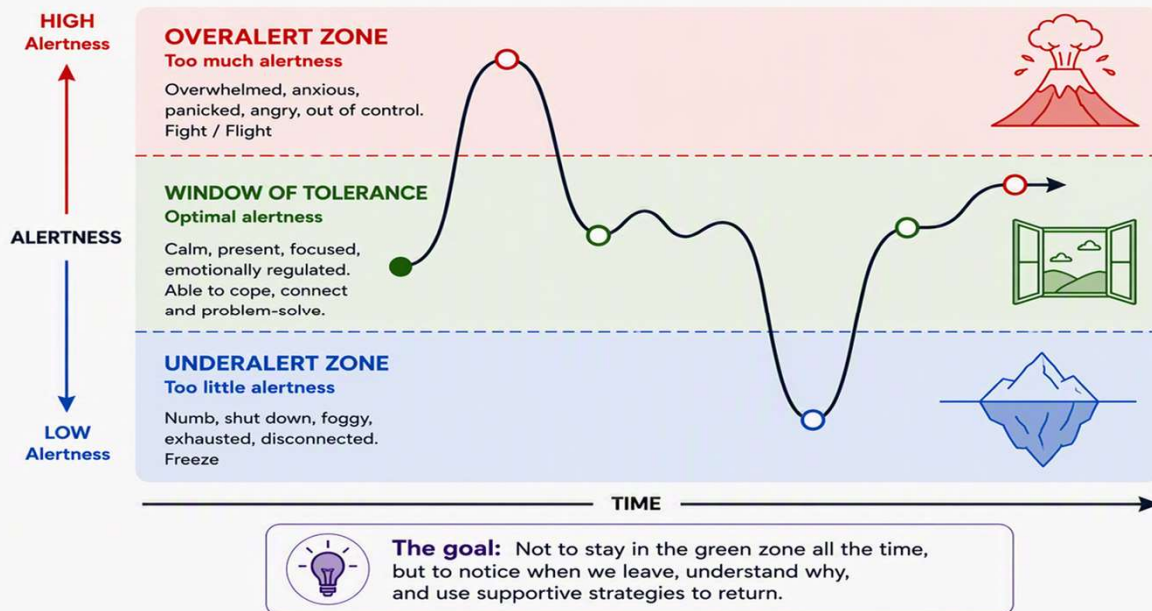
The mind and body are intrinsically linked and this is about empowering you with realistic, compassionate strategies to support your quality of life exactly as it is today.

The most important takeaway here is that wellbeing can coexist with illness.

A meaningful, fulfilling life is still entirely possible, even if it looks very different from before.

4

The Window of Tolerance



Now we are going to look at the window of tolerance, which is a tool we can use to understand and regulate our emotions. It helps us visualise our nervous system response, separating it into the blue, under-alert zone, the red over-alert zone, and our green window of tolerance. When we are within our window of tolerance, we are generally able to think clearly, manage our emotions, solve problems, and respond effectively to the challenges of daily life. However, sometimes we can tip over into the red zone- which can feel like anxiety, panic, racing thoughts, or muscle tension- or dip under into the blue zone- which can feel like brain fog, low motivational and emotional numbness.

These are natural fluctuations which occur throughout the day, for example, when we're winding down and getting ready for bed, we are likely be in a lower state of alertness. In contrast when we're preparing for a job interview, we are likely to experience a higher level of alertness.

These changes are normal and help us respond to the demands of different situations, however, difficulties can arise when we struggle to get back into our window of tolerance and spend too long in either the blue or red zones. For example, if following the job interview you struggle to get back into your window

of tolerance and remain in the red over-alert zone for the rest of the day, this can be a significant drain on both your physical and mental energy.

For people living with a long-term condition, staying within the window of tolerance can be particularly challenging. Symptoms such as pain and fatigue, uncertainty, changes in routine, and worries about the future can all place ongoing demands on the body and mind. As a result, people may find themselves moving more frequently between over-alert and under-alert states, making it harder to find a sense of balance.

The window of tolerance can help us better understand our emotions and recognise when our nervous system may need support. For example, if you know what being in the over-alert zone feels like for you, you may be able to notice the early signs that you are becoming overwhelmed and take steps to return to a more balanced state.

4

The Window of Tolerance



Different strategies work for different people. At the beginning of a stress response, when you first notice yourself becoming over-alert, **breathing exercises** may help calm your nervous system and keep you within your window of tolerance. However, once the stress response has been activated and your body has started producing stress hormones, movement may be more effective in helping to use up excess adrenaline and release physical tension.

This can be challenging if your body does not tolerate exercise well. It is important to choose activities that feel manageable and do not trigger post-exertional malaise. Gentle options may include doing a few wall push-ups, clenching and relaxing the muscles in your legs and buttocks, stretching, or marching your legs while seated. We can also experience difficulties if we get stuck in the blue under-alert zone. When this happens, it can be tempting to rely on quick sources of energy, such as sugar, caffeine, or sleeping for longer during the day. However, these approaches often provide only short-term relief and may further disrupt natural patterns of alertness.

Instead, it may be helpful to explore alternative ways of gently increasing alertness. Some people find movement beneficial, while others respond well to

temperature, for example taking a cool shower, or splashing your face with cold water. Spending time in natural daylight or listening to energising music can also help some people feel more alert.

The aim is not to stay within the window of tolerance all the time. The aim is to increase awareness of what over and under-alert states look and feel like for you, so that you can recognise when you need support and develop strategies that help you return to a place of balance.

5 Interoception

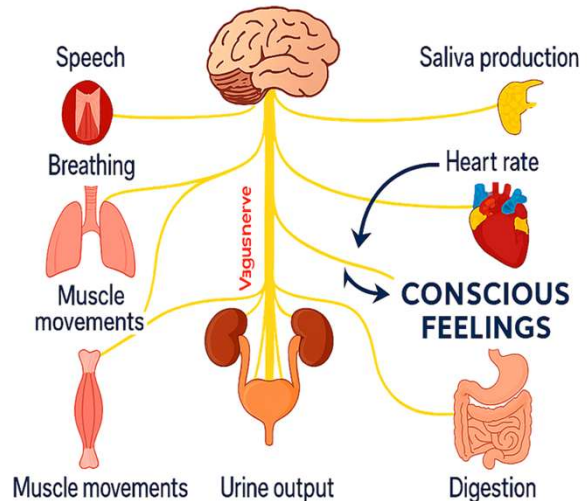
Interoception is an important skill, and one we can all struggle with.

Interoceptive awareness can improve with practice.

Try shifting from fear to curiosity by asking 'what does my body need?' rather than 'what is wrong with my body?'

What is my body asking for?

INTEROCEPTION sensing your internal state



But what can you do if you struggle to identify your physical and mental states? This is actually quite a common challenge. Interoception is our ability to sense internal bodily states, such as hunger, thirst, muscle tension and heart rate. Interoception is driven by the vagus nerve. This nerve starts in your brain and runs down through your neck, throat, and ears, extending all the way down the front of your body, passing through the diaphragm. Think of it as your body's internal superhighway. Interestingly, 80% of the vagus nerve's job is just listening—it sends sensory data from your organs up to your brain to monitor your internal states, while only 20% sends instructions back down such as signals to slow your heart rate or stimulate digestion.

When you live with a long-term condition, this internal signalling system can change, making interoception more difficult. Sometimes it feels completely overwhelming, and other times it feels totally unreliable. This can cause some people to disconnect from their bodies entirely to escape the discomfort, while others become hyper-vigilant, tracking every tiny shift with anxiety.

Today, we want to look at rebuilding a balanced, compassionate relationship with these bodily signals.

Interoceptive awareness is a skill. It can be gently practiced over time, and it is absolutely not something you need to perfect. The key is learning to notice your

sensations without judgment or fear.

For example, when you feel an early heaviness in your limbs, we want to view that with curiosity rather than frustration:

- **Old thought:** 'My body is failing me again.'
- **New thought:** 'What is my body asking for right now?'

Catching these signals early allows you to rest before you crash. This early intervention is one of our most powerful tools for preventing post-exertional malaise. Shifting from fear to curiosity helps you move away from the anxiety of symptom monitoring and gives you back confidence in your daily decisions.

You might find that your sense of interoception varies in the same way as your other symptoms. Be gentle with yourself on more difficult days and remember that even just asking the question 'what is my body asking for?' is a meaningful step forward."

6

Arrival & Grounding: Calming hand

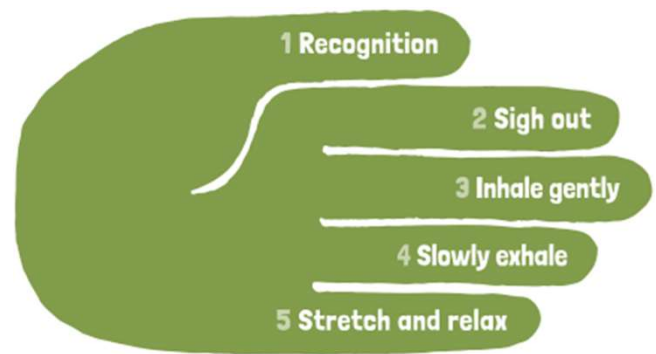


Calming hand can be used during times of distress, anxiety or breathlessness.

You should count out the steps on your hand through the exercise

Repeat the five steps of the calming hand as many times as needed

Aim for a gentle regulation of the nervous system



Let's take a moment to practise the Calming Hand together. You could use this strategy to help you check-in with your physical and mental state, or as a way to calm yourself when you are becoming over-alert.

Please remember that your comfort and safety come first. You are welcome to join in, adapt the exercise, or simply listen.

Start by gently taking hold of your thumb. The thumb represents recognition. Notice what is happening in your body right now. Remind yourself: "These feelings are temporary. I am safe in this moment."

Next take hold of your index finger. Take a gentle sigh out. Let your shoulders drop and allow your chest to soften. Sighing out empties the lungs, allows for you to breathe in fresh air and can help steady your heart rate.

Take hold of your middle finger, and take a slow, comfortable breath in through your nose.

Then take hold of your ring finger and gently breathe out until your breath

comes to a natural end.

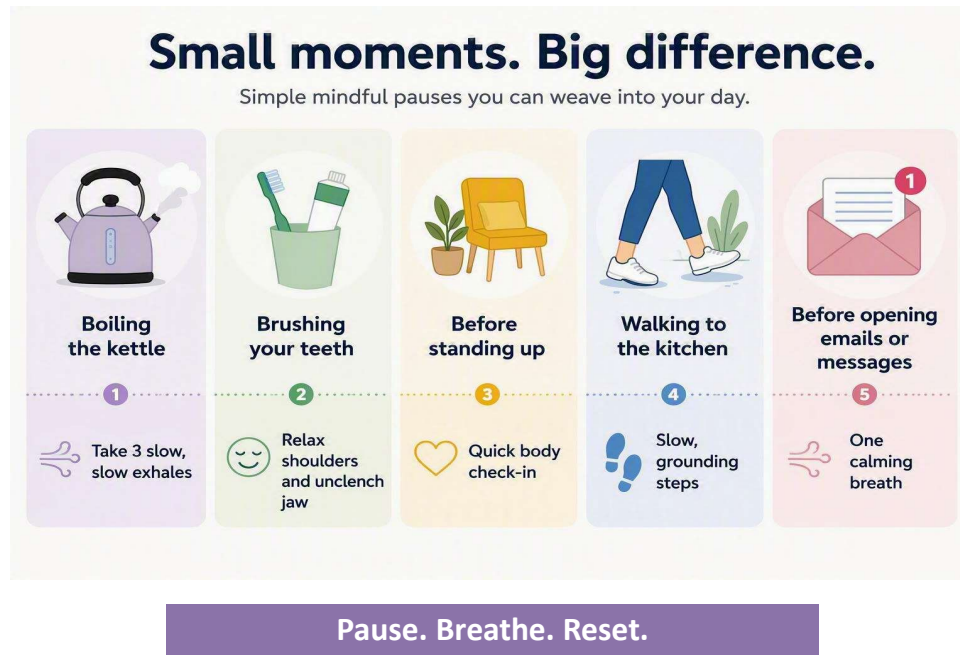
Finally take hold of your little finger. Gently stretch your fingers and wrists, then allow them to relax.

Take a moment to check in with yourself. Notice any changes in your breathing, tension, or awareness.

You can repeat these steps whenever you need them. The goal isn't to make difficult feelings disappear. The goal is to help your nervous system find a little more steadiness and support you in responding to the moment.

7

Habit Stacking



Habit stacking can help us incorporate some of these helpful strategies into our daily routine. When you are dealing with brain fog or fatigue, relying on memory, motivation, or willpower just doesn't work. Habit stacking reduces that cognitive load. Instead of just adding new tools to your routine, try attaching it to a task which you already do without thinking.

For example, you already boil the kettle every morning. That is your anchor. Your new stack could be: 'While the kettle is boiling, I will take three deep, mindful breaths.'

Brushing your teeth is an activity you undertake regularly, next time you could add in relaxing your shoulders and unclenching your jaw.

Before standing up, have a quick check in with how your body is feeling.

When walking to the kitchen can you take slower, more grounding steps.

Before opening emails or messages, try to take one calming breath.

This approach is grounded in behavioural psychology. The golden rule here is to start extremely small. Consistency matters so much more than intensity. By practicing these tiny habits daily, you begin to build a sense of structure, predictability, and self-trust—

the exact things that living with a long-term condition so often disrupts. You don't need an excess of energy to start; you just need one tiny anchor."

8

Meaningful Activity



Meaningful activities give our lives purpose, reflect our values and connect us to our social roles.

When we cannot engage in our meaningful activities, we can experience grief.

We encourage you to acknowledge this grief, and, with support, to explore new ways to engage in your meaningful activities within your new limitations.



The next two slides try and get to the bottom of how we live well even when our health changes. First let's consider meaningful activity.

When an illness steps in and takes away our independence or alters the roles we used to play in our families and workplaces, it can feel like a massive loss. And I want to pause and completely normalise that. It is entirely okay to grieve the activities you can no longer do. That grief is valid. But today, we want to gently open the door to redefining what 'meaningful' actually looks like for you right now, within your current limitations.

Society often tells us that to be meaningful, an activity has to be productive or look impressive to other people. It doesn't. Meaningful activity can be incredibly simple. It can look like a moment of pure sensory pleasure, like feeling the warmth of a cup of tea in your hands. It can look like a small moment of connection with a loved one or a pet, or just a few seconds of deep, quiet calm. We are looking for new, accessible sources of meaning.

For example, maybe you used to be a gardener, and can't do things like weeding and planting that you used to do. Are there ways that you could still engage in this activity, such as sitting in the garden, sewing a few seeds, or instructing a friend or family member in how to prune? You may still feel grief for the change in your abilities, however it may also help you to find new meaning and purpose.

9

Acceptance, Self-Compassion & Kindness

Understanding Acceptance

Role of Self-Compassion

Kindness as Strength

Acceptance changes the game



Now, let's look at the acceptance. When we talk about **acceptance**, I want to be entirely clear: this does not mean resignation. It does not mean giving up, waving a white flag, or liking your situation. Acceptance simply means acknowledging your reality in the present moment.

Think about how much energy it takes to constantly fight against the reality of your condition. When we stop expending energy on that internal resistance, we free up vital resources. Sometimes we can focus too much on problem solving which can make us forget to be kind and compassionate to ourselves. Chronic frustration and self-blame act like an invisible drain, directly worsening our physical fatigue and pain.

Acceptance changes the game. It creates the mental space needed to make positive changes, allowing you to respond to what your body actually needs right now, rather than fighting it.

Alongside acceptance, we introduce **self-compassion**. This is not a vague, 'soft' concept; it is an evidence-based clinical practice proven to reduce distress and improve coping mechanisms for people living with long-term conditions.

I invite you to do a quick mental check right now: notice your internal self-talk. Would you speak to a loved one, a friend, or a child using the same harsh words you use on yourself when you are struggling? Probably not.

Using compassionate language with yourself can help calm your nervous system by creating a feeling of safety. It tones down your nervous system's threat response and

supports emotional regulation. Being kind to your body is not indulgent, and it is not a sign of weakness. It is the most practical, rational, and necessary response to living with a serious health condition. Please remember that this shift in mindset takes time and continuous practice. Setbacks are completely normal, and they are simply part of the journey.

10

Departure & Grounding: Closing Breath Experience

Allow your body to come into a comfortable position

Let your eyes close

Take a natural breath in, don't force it

Slowly let the air out

Try and notice the weight of your body resting on the chair or bed

Feel it supporting you, and reassure yourself that in this moment you are safe



Transitions matter

Now I invite you to join me in one final, brief grounding exercise. This is designed to help you leave the session feeling settled and calm, rather than cognitively overloaded.

Ending our time together today with a focus on regulation helps your nervous system process and integrate everything we have shared. In this practice, we will place a gentle focus on our exhalation.

Elongating your out-breath stimulates the vagus nerve (remember it passes through the diaphragm), which triggers the part of your nervous system responsible for rest, relaxation, and safety.

Just like before, this is entirely invitational:

- **Allow your body** to sink into a comfortable position.
- **Let your eyes close** or rest your gaze softly in front of you.
- **Take a natural breath in**, without forcing it.
- **Slowly let the air out**, making your exhale just a little bit longer than your inhale. This is where the 'switch' to regulation and safety happens..

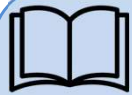
Let's do that together once more. Breathe in gently... and then enjoy a long, slow, smooth exhale.

As you continue this gentle rhythm, let your attention drift to the physical support beneath you. Notice the weight of your body resting on your chair, your couch, or your

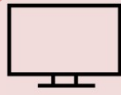
bed. Feel how completely supported you are by the surface underneath you in this very moment. You are safe, and you can let go of the need to hold onto any information mentally.

This closing exercise is a tool you can take with you and use completely independently. It is an excellent strategy to practice after any cognitively demanding activity, such as a doctor's appointment, a phone call, or a conversation.

Transitions matter. Taking a few moments to actively care for your nervous system after exertion is a valid, necessary, and compassionate part of self-management.

**Read**

Read a blog on acceptance and change in long term conditions

**Watch**

A neuroscientist explains how breathing impacts the brain

**Do**

Try using the calming hand technique



My Health – Living Well With Long Term Conditions

As we bring our session to a close, let's talk about how to translate today's information into real, everyday action.

If there is one core message I want you to take away, it is this: supported self-management is built on small, compassionate, and sustainable steps. It is not about demanding major life overhauls from yourself. In fact, I highly encourage you to choose just one tiny strategy to experiment with over the coming week. That is more than enough. It could be trying out a simple habit stack, picking a small change from the wellness wheel, or simply giving yourself conscious permission to rest a little bit earlier than usual.

We are going to open up the floor for a question-and-answer session now. This is an opportunity to clarify anything we've covered and to share your thoughts. However, please know that this is entirely optional. We recognise that some of you may not have the energy left to engage verbally right now, and that is absolutely fine. You can just sit back and listen or simply drop off if you need to rest.

Finally, I want to thank you for the energy it took just to attend today. Living with a long-term condition means energy is a precious commodity, and showing up today is an achievement in itself.

We want to leave you with a sense of hope that is grounded in realism. Your symptoms

may continue to persist, but your skills, your understanding, and your self-compassion can—and will—continue to grow. Thank you all so much for your time.