

Post Polio Depression *by Linda Van Aken*

As I begin this piece, let me state that I am simply a fellow member of the Post Polio Support Group. I am not a professional; nor do I have any real data to verify my speculations on this topic. However, through peer counseling sessions and conversations with local members, as well as internet contacts, I have made a few observations. It seems many of us have occasionally experienced what I will refer to as "polio depression". This is not like the true clinical condition that a professional might diagnose as depression. Instead, it tends to be a combination of frustration, anger and the inability to cope with the changes that Post Polio forces on our lives. Reactive or situational depression is often the result of anger turned inward. Moreover, as we struggle to cope with the physical decline caused by Post Polio Syndrome, there is no one to blame, no one place to vent anger. So often, we feel betrayed by our own bodies. Thus we turn the anger inward, even if briefly and may suffer short bouts of *polio depression*.

I find it interesting that the several of those who seem to experience this malady are often those who were "Passers" or at least ones that had a remarkable recovery and managed to live life fully. Passers are polio victims who recovered to the point of appearing to be abled bodied and often lead their lives without others knowing they had suffered from polio. Passers and those who were quite mobile are now confronting their disabilities for the first time in their lives. For years, the ravages of polio were merely a minor obstacle to overcome. Though that seems to be the attitude of most stricken by polio, it is especially true for anyone who had very few limitations placed on their lives because of the polio experience. For all of us, who rebounded from the initial bout with polio, facing the challenges of PPS seems like a cruel and unusual punishment. We beat this thing once and now it has come back to challenge us again in our golden years. That can be disheartening and could be a major contributor to the *polio depression* that I have noticed.

What tends to be a factor in *polio depression*? Debilitating fatigue or unrelenting pain causes such dramatic change in our ability to remain independent that we lose faith in our ability to recover to any level of stability. When hope for a positive future seeps away, many of us sink into that borderline state of a mini depression. We pace, we sleep, we rest and yet many times even minor activity triggers that overwhelming fatigue or pain. It is then that our coping skills may fail us and we become mildly depressed.

Exercise and positive activities are prescribed for the usual treatment of mild depression. As you well know, people with Post Polio Syndrome often struggle to maintain their daily lives, so the idea of exercise is a daunting task. It is not a matter of "I'll do something else"; it is a matter of "can I even transfer to my bed or the chair?" The idea of finding fascinating alternatives to keep us interested and enthralled with life is almost an alien thought. How much can you do to feel good about life when you are so limited physically? Financial limitations in life may also trigger frustrations. It is difficult to keep a decent family budget on most average incomes. When early retirement is forced upon us it dramatically changes our goals for the future. Funds once earmarked for fun often go towards adaptive equipment. All of these factors play a major role in the creation of *polio depression*.

One positive is that the *polio depression* I describe is usually a temporary situation. It is natural to grieve for the loss we suffer when Post Polio begins or we lose

another level of ability. Each new level that we progress to takes adjustment and a change in our mental outlook to adapt to the new set of circumstances. By acknowledging the loss and accepting the needed changes in lifestyle, we are better able to cope and less likely to fall into that period of polio depression. However, I suspect that each of us has dealt with some degree of this malady at one time or another due to the changes we must make in dealing with our medical condition

Even the wonderful help we receive from family, loved ones or caregivers can affect our self-esteem and play a role in how we deal with life. If loved ones push us to give up a beloved activity or act as our conscience in reminding us we can no longer do something, it's a reminder that we are losing control of our own destiny. It is easy to resent loved ones for denying us our favored past times even if they do have our best interests at heart. The key is to stop, take time and decide for ourselves that we must adhere to a new set of rules. When we take back the decision making process, then it is less likely we will fall victim to the occasionally debilitating sad times.

When can Polio Depression occur? This is not necessarily triggered by normal stresses in life such as a move, death of a loved one or other dramatic life events. Polio depression can hit us following simple pleasures like vacations, outings that drain our minimal energy reserves or even the need to constantly monitor a daily use of energy. How often I hear the word "crash" from polio survivors who have temporarily set aside their normal pacing routine. If we are house bound or even confined to a bed during a recovery period, this is when the polio depression hits. When you feel crummy, it is hard to be upbeat and enthusiastic about life in general. If it takes weeks to recover from a particular event, it makes it that much more difficult to cope with this new plateau and maintain a positive perspective about life.

Knowing that, it is not unusual to feel a mild form of depression periodically may help you get through these doldrums. Recognizing that a recovery period is necessary can allow you to realize that you are controlling the situation simply by providing time for your body to recharge. It's a matter of getting through the down days and looking forward to the long term goal of feeling better by heeding your body's need to rest and rest and rest some more.

Acceptance of the fact that some activities or events are worth the consequences of a weeklong fatigue hangover may also prevent the onset of a mild depression. You know beforehand that it will require time to recover and you must allow that time once you have over used what strength your body still has. Of course, ideally we learn to pace or use assistive devices to prevent undo strain on our weakened bodies. At the same time, we need to find entertaining projects that provide distractions. It is a challenge to find the balance between satisfying our emotional and mental needs and taking care of our physical needs.

Other factors can play into the polio depression. Anxiety, isolation, fear of the future and uncooperative family can all create an overwhelming frustration with our condition. It is not easy to "fix" any or all of these problems, but simply by recognizing the culprits may help eliminate the worst of the depression symptoms.

It takes a tremendous amount of positive coping skills just to make it through life on a daily basis. We must pace and rest to maintain a physical harmony. That means we can be at risk in satisfying our emotional and mental needs. These combined forces can easily lead to a short bout of *polio depression*. When this occurs it is important to both recognize the condition and then take steps to work through the situation. Talking to others with PPS is often a tremendous help. Seeking counseling with a professional counselor or psychologist knowledgeable about PPS can aid you in discovering new coping skills that will prevent future occurrences. Finding inner peace by examining your own spirituality may be a key to stopping a bout of polio depression. Nevertheless, do not let it go too long without seeking professional help.

As I end this piece, let me again remind you I am not a professional. This is simply an observation as a member of the polio community. I have heard it said so often that many polio victims who now have Post Polio Syndrome tend to experience a bout with minor depression at times, that I decided to address the topic. We welcome other comments and observations from our members.