

## **Empowering patients: GP, Rupa Joshi, describes the group clinics that are helping patients to achieve their goals and manage symptoms of long-term pain and long COVID**

Group clinics have been a powerful way of connecting patients who have similar medical conditions, to support them and, most importantly, build a sense of community so that they do not feel alone in their suffering. A multidisciplinary team of clinicians are able to use their individual experiences and skills to give their patients a holistic and empowering experience of how care can be delivered. These group clinics can be delivered in person, or more recently, via video group clinics.

Ten-minute appointments in primary care did not feel like enough time to devote to complex problems. We decided to start a programme for our patients with chronic pain, which consisted of six group-led sessions. The patients chose to discuss self-compassion, coping with daily activities, stress and relaxation techniques (including mindfulness, meditation, nutrition and lifestyle changes). This was a new way of working where the patients built up a network of support. They felt empowered to look after themselves with new knowledge. Everyone learned from each other, including the clinicians learning from our patients.

Once the pandemic hit, we moved to video group clinics. We are currently on our third cohort of patients with long COVID. We are fortunate to have our local long COVID clinic consultant as part of our multidisciplinary team. Our health and wellbeing coach discusses nutrition, especially the anti-inflammatory diet. Our mental health practitioner (MHP) leads on self-compassion, pacing, the concept of a 'hidden illness', and coping with brain fog and fatigue. We discuss the importance of sleep, have a mini movement/stretching class and demonstrate breathing techniques with our personal trainer. We talk about local community services and employment. We have found that many patients have stopped working due to the nature of the illness. People may feel well one day, but too exhausted to get out of bed the next day. Explaining this situation to employers is difficult and people often feel a lot of guilt, which leads to anxiety and isolation.

The feedback has been exceptionally positive, with patient 'champions' sharing their experiences. At the beginning of the sessions, the general feeling was that the clinicians would be managing symptoms. Towards the end, patients were saying that they now felt empowered to manage their own symptoms, by using the tools and techniques that they had learnt through their journey. These self-management techniques included dietary changes, such as reducing gluten, dairy and sugars in the diet, while increasing water, fresh fruit and vegetables, and using magnesium and vitamin D supplements. The impact of anxiety on breathing is explained, and patients are taught breathing exercises to help manage anxiety and also exercises to help with dysfunctional breathing in long COVID. Mental health is a big factor and patients can self-care by using reflective practice, self-compassion and journaling. Pacing is imperative for the feelings of exhaustion; patients start to listen to their bodies and spot the signs of doing too much. Sleep

hygiene is discussed and simple exercises and movement to help with joint pains and energy levels are taught.

It is important for each participant to set a personalised goal at the end of each session. This reinforces the learning and gives an immense sense of achievement once reached. Verbalising the goal to the rest of the group, writing it in the chat box, and checking in at the next session on progress gives a sense of accountability and pride, thereby giving ownership to empower our patients. At the end of the course, our participants were able to set six goals (one per session) which they can personalise to their own symptoms and circumstances. The team helps, encourages and supports our patients to achieve their goals and the patients are better able to manage the symptoms of long COVID.