

## The hidden struggle: the impact of arthritis on emotional wellbeing

- *One third of people living with arthritis are thought to be clinically depressed or anxious<sup>1</sup>*
  - *Arthritis Australia unveils new features of its EMPOWERED online resource, highlighting the link between arthritis and emotional wellbeing*
- *Young adults with arthritis to benefit from new source of expert advice and support*

**28 May 2017:** To mark this year's Arthritis Awareness Week (28 May-3 June), Arthritis Australia has today announced its commitment to help improve the mental health of Australians living with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), ankylosing spondylitis (AS) and psoriatic arthritis (PsA). This coincides with the unveiling of new features on its online resource, **EMPOWERED**, which will further enhance its support for Australians living with these conditions.

### **Arthritis and emotional wellbeing**

The significance of the impact arthritis has on one's mental wellbeing has been reinforced through a new collaboration between Arthritis Australia and **beyondblue**, to produce an '[Arthritis and emotional wellbeing](#)' patient resource. The patient resource provides those living with the condition with insight into the potential signs and symptoms that may indicate an impact on their emotional wellbeing, along with practical strategies and advice for managing it.

"Arthritis is a chronic health condition that can affect physical health and mental wellbeing. The ongoing physical symptoms of arthritis, such as chronic pain, fatigue and disturbed sleep, can often cause distress and affect one's mood," said Ainslie Cahill, Chief Executive Officer of Arthritis Australia.

"While the physical impacts of arthritis are widely known, the impact of the condition on a person's emotional wellbeing is less known," said Ms Cahill.

Launched in 2015, **EMPOWERED** was developed by Arthritis Australia to provide timely, relevant and actionable information and assistance to people living with RA, AS and PsA. The online resource has now been updated to include new content and information, including videos with clinicians and patients, highlighting the link between arthritis and emotional wellbeing.

According to Professor Ian Hickie AM, Co-Director of Health and Policy for the Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney, anxiety and depression are common in people with arthritis.

"As is the case with other chronic illnesses, research shows that people with arthritis are more likely to also have anxiety and / or depression," said Professor Hickie.

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<sup>1</sup> Murphy, L.B. et al. Anxiety and depression among US adults with arthritis: Prevalence and correlates. *Arthritis Care & Research*. Volume 64, Issue 7, July 2012, pp. 968–976.

“Both arthritis and depression, if untreated, can impact greatly on a person’s ability to keep active and enjoy life. When both conditions coexist, a person’s ability to function in everyday life, socially and at work or study, is often impaired,” he said.

A study from the University of Toronto, recently found the rates of suicidal thoughts and tendencies in people with arthritis are significantly higher than the general population.<sup>2</sup>

The study, revealed one in 26 men with arthritis had attempted suicide, compared to one in 50 men who did not have any form of arthritis.<sup>2</sup> The rate was also higher among women with arthritis; with 5.3 per cent of women with arthritis in the study having attempted suicide, compared with 3.2 per cent of women without arthritis.<sup>2</sup>

“Some studies have shown that various forms of arthritis, such as rheumatoid arthritis, are linked with mental health issues; with many finding it difficult to cope with their physical symptoms due to depression or anxiety,” said Professor Hickie.

“It’s important that people with rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and psoriatic arthritis consult a healthcare professional to discuss how they are feeling about their condition, rather than try and go it alone,” he said.

### ***Improved access to local support groups and services***

The updated *EMPOWERED* resource will also now include a special geo-locator function to help Australians living with RA, AS and PsA to access support groups and services in their local area.

“By including a geo-locator function on *EMPOWERED*, we hope those living with rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and psoriatic arthritis, as well as their family, friends and carers, can better connect with our state and territory based support organisations and engage in activities in their local community,” said Ms Cahill.

“Staying connected with others going through the same experiences can often help to alleviate some of the emotional burden of arthritis and improve their mental wellbeing,” she said.

### ***Supporting young adults with arthritis***

Today also marks the launch of a new information resource for young Australian adults living with arthritis. Entitled [\*‘Living with arthritis: A guide for young adults’\*](#), the resource has been specifically designed to include input from people who were diagnosed with arthritis when they were young.

“People often believe that arthritis only affects older people. This is not true. Arthritis can occur at any age, including in children and young adults, and can significantly impact their quality of life,” said Ms Cahill.

“Finding out you have arthritis when you are young can be confusing and frightening. We have developed this new guide for young adults to help them navigate the journey from diagnosis to management of their condition, which can be fraught with many challenges,” she said.

The new guide, developed by Arthritis Australia, provides expert advice to young Australians living with the condition, on issues such as staying connected, lifestyle choices, education, employment and travel.

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<sup>2</sup> Fuller-Thomson, E et al. Arthritis and suicide attempts: findings from a large nationally representative Canadian survey. *Rheumatology International*, September 2016, Volume 36, Issue 9, pp.1237-1248.

“The impact of arthritis on the lives of young people is often overlooked. We hope this new guide will provide those living with the condition with practical tips and advice so they may best manage their condition, while enjoying a good quality of life,” said Ms Cahill.

### ***EMPOWERED***

Arthritis Australia urges all Australians living with rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and psoriatic arthritis, their healthcare professionals and their families and friends, to visit the *EMPOWERED* site for information, videos and support on how to best manage these conditions.

For further information or support, please visit [www.empowered.org.au](http://www.empowered.org.au) or contact the Arthritis Infoline on 1800 011 041.

**– ENDS –**

The *EMPOWERED* online resource has been independently developed by Arthritis Australia with an educational grant from Janssen (Janssen-Cilag Pty Ltd).

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### About Arthritis Australia

Arthritis Australia is a charitable not-for-profit organisation, and is the peak arthritis body in Australia. It is supported by affiliate offices in ACT, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia. Arthritis Australia provides support and information to people with arthritis as well as their family and friends. It promotes awareness of the challenges facing people with arthritis across the community, and advocates on behalf of consumers to leaders in business, industry and government.