Coping with Illness: Insight from the Bhagavad Gita

Bharti Kalra  
*Bharti Hospital, Karnal, Haryana, India.*

Ameya Joshi  
*Bhaktivedanta Hospital and Research Institute, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.*

Sanjay Kalra  
*Bharti Hospital, Karnal, Haryana, India.*

Vivekanand G. Shanbhag  
*Bhaktivedanta Hospital and Research Institute, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India.*

Jyoti Kunwar  
*AIIMS, New Delhi, India.*

*See next page for additional authors*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_mc_med_diabet_endocrinol_metab](https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_mc_med_diabet_endocrinol_metab)

Part of the *Endocrinology, Diabetes, and Metabolism Commons*

**Recommended Citation**

*Available at: [https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_mc_med_diabet_endocrinol_metab/70](https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_mc_med_diabet_endocrinol_metab/70)*
Coping with Illness: Insight from the Bhagavad Gita


Department of Gynecology, Bharti Hospital, Karnal, Haryana, 1Department of Endocrinology, Bhaktivedanta Hospital and Research Institute, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, 2Department of Endocrinology, Bharti Hospital, Karnal, Haryana, 3Deputy Director, Bhaktivedanta Hospital and Research Institute, Mumbai, Maharashtra, 4Department of Psychiatry, AIIMS, New Delhi, India, 5Department of Endocrinology, ADK Hospital, Maldives, 6Department of Endocrinology, AIIMS, New Delhi, 7Department of Endocrinology, PGIMS, Rohtak, Haryana, 8Department of Endocrinology, Fortis Hospital, Mohali, Punjab, India, 9Department of Behavioural and Allied Sciences, Amity University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, 10Department of Endocrinology, Excel Center, Guwahati, Assam, 11Department of Endocrinology, Osmania Hospital, Hyderabad, Telangana, 12Department of Medicine, MLN Medical College, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, 13Department of Medicine, Diabetes Obesity And Thyroid Clinic, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India, 14Department of Endocrinology, Dhaka Medical College Hospital, 15Department of Endocrinology, Mittford Hospital, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 16Department of Endocrinology, Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract

The Shrimad Bhagavad Gita enlightens everyone on how to cope up with various situations in life. It uses the conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna to highlight initial negative coping mechanisms exhibited by the latter. It goes on to showcase positive coping skills suggested by Lord Krishna and implemented by Arjuna. The Bhagavad Gita, through this “case-based methodology,” teaches us how to cope with a demanding situation. Diabetes is a lifestyle disease, which warrants a thorough change in one’s lifestyle, including changes in basic activities such as diet and exercise. This brief communication utilizes the teachings of Bhagavad Gita to help in coping with illness, especially chronic illness such as diabetes. The article cites verses from the Bhagavad Gita to show how one may cope with the stress of illness such as diabetes.

Keywords: Acceptance, action, anger, blame, coping skills, dejection, denial, diabetes distress, grief, knowledge, optimism

Introduction

The Bhagavad Gita, the divine song, records the advice given by Lord Krishna to Arjuna, on the battlefield of the Mahabharata War.[1,2] The Gita is basically a conversation between Arjuna, who succumbs to dejection when he realizes he has to fight his kinsmen, and Lord Krishna, who helps him cope with this dilemma and stress. The Bhagavad Gita is much more than a religious or philosophical text: it’s 700+ verses offer insight into every aspect of life and are universally relevant. The text has been used to plan healthy nutrition and classify modern endocrine and metabolic diseases as well.[3,4]

Diagnosis of diabetes is also associated with a feeling of shock. The subject is faced with stress due to diagnosis and may experience a sense of grief as he may have to part with some of the most beloved things in life. He also has to be motivated to exercise self-restraint, change lifestyle, and comply with medical advice. Management may include components such as self-blood glucose monitoring and insulin administration, which are not perceived well by most.

We present a list of curated verses, which describe the reactions of Arjuna to stress and explain how Lord Krishna encourages him to develop and use positive coping skills. This abridged selection can help cope with illness as well. Although we use diabetes as an exemplar, we hope that this communication will be useful in any illness. The verses contained herein may be used by health-care professionals to encourage healthy coping in all individuals seeking medical care.

Address for correspondence: Dr. Sanjay Kalra, Department of Endocrinology, Bharti Hospital, Karnal - 132 001, Haryana, India. E-mail: brideknl@gmail.com

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

For reprints contact: reprints@medknow.com

The Stress

In the subconscious mind, Arjuna knows that most warriors of the Kaurava army are not good people even though they are his relatives. Similarly, we know that habits such as overeating, wrong eating as well as a sedentary lifestyle are not healthy. At diagnosis of diabetes, the subject suddenly realizes that these actions pose a threat to healthy life. This leads to feelings of stress, anxiety, and nervousness.

Arjuna’s feelings of stress of possible threat and compulsion to fight against own relatives are described as follows:

“limbs of my body quivering and mouth drying up, whole body trembling, hairs standing on end, and skin burning all over.”

Sidanti mama gatram, mukham cha parishushyati (1:28)

Vepathushya sharirene, romaharshascha jayate; twakchaiva paridahyate (1:29).

Like a patient with newly diagnosed diabetes feels that his most important weapon, i.e., self-belief and self-confidence are deserting him, Arjuna describes a similar emotion:

“My master weapon, the gandiva dhanushya is falling from my hand.”

gandiva shamaste hastat (1:29).

Sanjay, who narrates the Bhagavad Gita to the blind King Dhritarashtra, describes Arjuna’s mental and physical response as follows:

“Arjuna, whose mind was agitated by grief,… cast aside his bow and arrows, (and) sank into the hinder part of his chariot.”

Evam uktvarjunah sankhaye, rathopastha upavishat, visrujya shariram chapam, shoka samvigna manasah (1:46)

“overwhelmed with pity, …eyes…filled with tears and agitated,…full of sorrow.”

Ashrupurna kulekshanam, vishadantamidam vokym (2:01)

Negative Coping

In the majority of patients with type 2 diabetes, the condition is precipitated, to some extent, by an unhealthy lifestyle. Many self-indulgent habits, which have been pleasurable till date, now become threatening. Some participants may question the importance of having a life deprived of the various materialistic pleasures that they had been enjoying till date. Others may wonder what sense it makes to give up all the worldly pleasures, for which they have been striving. How can one give up all that he loved once in his life?

Similarly, Arjuna feels what good he is going to achieve by killing his own relatives, with whom he has been associated till now.

Na cha Shreya punaschami, hatva swajanam ahave (1:31)

Arjuna questions the usefulness of availing a kingdom when many he liked are now against him.

Kimo rajyena govinda, kim bhogair jivetena wa (1:32)

He also asks how he can derive pleasure by killing his own people.

Swajanam hi katham hatva, sukhinah shyama madhavaha (1:36)

Arjuna expresses his grief of fighting against own people.

Yadrajya sukha lobhena, hantum swajana mudyataha (1:44)

He expresses desire to be killed unresisting without fighting by hands of sons of Dhritarashtra.

Yadi mama apratikaram, ashastram shastrapanayaaha, dhuratrasrtha rane hanyus (1:45).

These feelings are sometimes akin to the feelings of a person with diabetes when faced with the relenting task of coping with the demanding illness and giving up pleasures he/she cherished.

Arjuna’s symptoms can be summarized as grief, fear, and pessimism. Other verses of Bhagavad Gita describe his initial coping mechanisms, which are characterized by extreme and pervasive negative thoughts.

The adjective-noun “dejection” or “distress” is an apt word to describe the initial response that most of us exhibit when faced with illness, especially chronic illness. This means that our feelings, emotions, and concerns are “normal,” just like Arjuna’s were. It also implies that we may read the Bhagavad Gita to find out how Lord Krishna helps Arjuna cope with his stress. We can then utilize the same coping skills to cope with illness-associated stress such as diabetes distress.[9]

Arjuna’s Confusion

After the initial feelings of anxiety, stress, and negativity from the diagnosis of diabetes, come feelings of confusion. This confusion relates to the dilemma of choosing the right path of action. Similarly, in the Gita, Arjuna is confused and uncertain about what to do.

“How—shall I fight…?”

Ishubhi pariyotsami, pujarha Madhusudhanaha (2:04)

“Now I am puzzled, confused about my duty, about what is wrong and right. I am your disciple and please guide me the right way.”

Karpanya dosho pahata swabhavaha, pruchyati tvam dharma sammudha santetaha, yacheya samnischyati brumhi tanme, shishyasteha sadhinam tvam prapannam (2:07)

However, Arjuna does realize his confusion and requests Lord Krishna to help him. This is the first, and perhaps the most important and rate limiting step in coping with illness. We realize that we have an illness, we find that we are unable to cope with it, for which we consult a health-care provider to seek help.

Arjuna is faced with multiple, conflicting emotions. This creates further stress and leads him to a state of extreme depression and inaction.
Kalra, et al.: Vedic coping mechanisms for diabetes

“I do not see any means that can drive away the grief which is drying up my senses.”

Nahi prapashyami mamapnudya (2:08)

Arjuna again said... “I will not fight,” and became silent.

Na yotsya iti govinda muktaha (2:09)

**Krishna’s Analysis**

Lord Krishna motivates Arjuna to fight, using a direct approach.

“Yield not to unmanliness, Arjuna; this does not befit you”

“Stand-up”

Naitatwayu prapashyate, kshudro hridaya durbalyam, tyaktwo
tishtha parantapaha 2:03

The Bhagavad Gita is an analysis of coping mechanisms, followed by an effort to eliminate negative mood states such as grief and anger. Lord Krishna helps Arjuna analyze his feelings so that he can overcome his negative coping style. In diabetes, we expect our caregivers (health-care professionals, family members, and community members) to do the same. The caregiver has the most important responsibility of motivating the person with diabetes. She/he must be able to make the person diagnosed with diabetes understand that for a meaningful life she/he has to be strong, get rid of wrong habits, stop grieving about same, and then only life can shape up.

“You grieve over those who should not be grieved for…”

Ashochyanan vashochyashwa, pradnya wadanschya
bhasmase (2:11).

**Positive Coping: Equanimity and Acceptance**

Lord Krishna, while describing the immortality of the soul, sings verses which help us understand how to tackle illness. There is no better example of motivation to perform the right action, in an unbiased manner, than these slokas by Lord Krishna, which precede the description of shipradhnya. The first step, he states, is equanimity coupled with acceptance of reality.

Yogastha kurukarmani, sangamtyaktva dhnanjaya (2:48).

This acceptance allows us to handle the various conflicting positive and negative emotions, thoughts, and information that we are exposed to when illness is diagnosed. Moreover, finally, we are able to choose the right ones, in an unbiased manner, reaching the state of yoga.

Siddhya siddha samobhutva, samatvam yoga uchyate (2:48).

Lord Krishna tells Arjuna to keep all abominable activities away from himself, similar to a health-care professional who guides the patient to stay away from things that worsen diabetes.

Darena hravaram karma, buddhiyoga dhnanjaya (2:49)

Finally The Lord says:

When your mind is no longer disturbed by flowery language and it remains in a stance of self-realization, then you have attained divine consciousness

Shruti vratipannate, yadastasyati nischala
samadhowachalya buddhihi, stada yogamawapsyasasi (2:53)

A relaxed mind is a prerequisite for diabetes management. Glycemic control cannot be achieved until your mind is stable and calm. The Gita helps reduce counter regulatory hormone levels by promoting calmness of mind.

**Positive Coping: Anger and Blame Management**

Lord Krishna also cautions Arjuna against misplaced anger (or blame), in one of the most important slokas of Shrimad Bhagavad Gita. Anger is one of the most important negative emotions. Anger against medication, lifestyle modification, glucose monitoring, or health-care provider detracts the person with diabetes from the right path required for diabetes management. Such a person can never be happy and successful. Hence, it is important for the health-care provider to build a relation of trust and pacify the patient, for his own benefit.

“From anger arises infatuation; from infatuation, confusion of memory; from confusion of memory, loss of reason; and from loss of reason one goes to complete ruin.”

krodhat bhavati sammoha, sammohat smritivibhramaha, smruti bhranshat buddhinashi, buddhinashat pranashyati, nachabhaava yatah shantir, shantasya kutaha sukham (2:63)

“...how can there be happiness for one lacking peace of mind?” (2:66)

Anger and blame are natural reactions to a diagnosis of diabetes. However, these emotions serve no purpose and are self-defeating. Anger clouds our reasoning and prevents us from taking correct decisions.

**Positive Coping: Focus on Action**

Lord Krishna supports action, rather than grief or depression, as a means of coping with a stressful situation. Multiple slokas of the Gita reinforce this message, which is equally relevant for persons with diabetes.

“...stand up, Arjuna, determined to fight”

tasmad uttishtha kaunteya, yuddhaya kritanischayaha. 2:37

“...nor let your attachment be to inaction”

Ma karma phala he turhur; mate sangastva karmanhi 2:47

Lord Krishna promotes both the paths of knowledge and action but clearly supports action. This is true in health as well. While we should equip ourselves with knowledge and information about our illness, we should not limit ourselves to this. It is more fruitful to take tangible action to fight disease. This may be in the form of investigations, nonpharmacological therapy, drug treatment, or other modalities such as surgery.
“The Yoga of Action, being easier of practice, is superior to the yoga of knowledge 5:2

Sanyasa karmayogaschhya nishreyam sakara ubhau, tayostu karma sanyasat karmayogyo vishishyate

“…he is no yogi who has merely given up all activity”

Na sanyasi cha yogicha, na niragnir na chakriyaha 6:1

“Man does not attain freedom from action without entering upon action”

Nakaranam anarambham, naishyakarmyam purushoshrute 3:4

“He who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“The Yoga of Action, being easier of practice, is superior to the yoga of knowledge 5:2

Sanyasa karmayogaschhya nishreyam sakara ubhau, tayostu karma sanyasat karmayogyo vishishyate

“…he is no yogi who has merely given up all activity”

Na sanyasi cha yogicha, na niragnir na chakriyaha 6:1

“Man does not attain freedom from action without entering upon action”

Nakaranam anarambham, naishyakarmyam purushoshrute 3:4

“He who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)

**Physical Activity**

Lord Krishna emphatically calls for maintenance of physical health though activity and exercise. He clearly states that one cannot even maintain his body without physical exercise. This is an apt reminder for people to remain physically active so as to prevent diabetes (the need of the hour), as well as for persons with diabetes/other lifestyle disorder patients to view exercise as an important part of disease management.

“…he who outwardly restraining the organs of…action,…is called a hypocrite.”

Indriyarte vimudhatma, mithyacharsa uchyate (3:6)
Kalra, et al.: Vedic coping mechanisms for diabetes

decision-making, this is sometimes not possible because of lack of information equipoise. In such a case, it would be prudent to trust an experienced physician, who “has performed all actions.” At times, inaction (“let us not go for bariatric surgery right away”) may be appropriate or of medical action. In other situations, action can promote inaction (“let us take insulin to achieve good glycemic control now so that we do not need dialysis later”).

CHOICE OF HEALTH-CARE PROVIDER

“He who lacks discrimination, is devoid of faith, and is at the same time possessed by doubt, is lost to the spiritual path. For the doubting soul, there is no happiness.”

Adhnyashwa shradhanschya, samshayatma vinashyati, nayam lokasti na paro, na sukham samshayatmanaha 4:40.

In illness, we often tend to distrust the very persons and interventions that are trying to make us healthy. We should be able to discriminate rational and evidence-based schools of medicine from others, identify qualified and experienced health care providers, and utilize their services. The chronic care model is based on a trusting patient–physician relationship: It will not work unless reciprocal respect, trust, and honesty are integrated into this interaction.

On a separate role, we must ensure that we choose the correct (qualified and experienced) health-care provider. One of the reasons, why Arjuna was victorious in the Mahabharata, was that he sought support from the correct teacher, Lord Krishna.

FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Lord Krishna is a beautiful example of a person-centered personality. He does his best to guide Arjuna, but nowhere does he force his views upon either Arjuna or other individuals.

“Thus has this wisdom, more profound than all profundities, been imparted to you by Me; deeply pondering over it, now do as you like.”

Confidence

“Iti te Dhyana makhyatam, guhyad guhya taram maya, vimrshheta dasheshena, yatheshasi tatha kuru 18:63

I have you,…heard this gospel…attentively? And has your delusion born of ignorance been destroyed…?

Twaye kagrena chetas, kacchida Dhyana sammoha, pranaste dhananjayaha 18:72

After listening to the advice of health-care provider, the person with diabetes should have the feeling of.s

“…this delusion of mine has entirely disappeared”

mohoyam vigato mama 11:1

“…I have gained wisdom. I am free of all doubt…”

Sthitosmi gata sandeha, karishye vachanam tavaha 18:73

The Bhagavad Gita ends on a positive note, and Arjuna understands that salvation lies in appropriate action. Similarly, every life with diabetes should be marked by timely action, to ensure optimal therapeutic outcomes. The Bhagavad Gita, thus, offers optimism to the person with diabetes and to his caregivers.

Financial support and sponsorship
Nil.

Conflicts of interest
There are no conflicts of interest.

References