

Coping With Chronic Illness

More than 90 million Americans live with some form of a chronic illness, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, lung disease, arthritis and diabetes. A chronic illness is a medical problem that lasts a year or longer, limits what a person can do, and requires ongoing care. The course of illness and level of disability from chronic diseases varies widely. Some have mild but manageable discomfort and few physical limitations. Others have persistent and debilitating pain and decreased quality of life.

Diagnosis and adjustments

With diseases such as cardiovascular or lung disease, while very serious, the diagnosis and treatment is relatively straightforward. However, with conditions such as autoimmune disorders, thyroid disease, chronic fatigue or multiple sclerosis, the diagnosis is anything but straightforward. It can take months or even years for an accurate diagnosis and viable treatment plan.

Feeling sick or tired and not knowing the cause makes some people question their sanity. Many of these people are relieved to finally have a diagnosis. “At least I know that I am not crazy” is a common response to the frustration associated with a lengthy diagnostic process.

When a diagnosis is made, an individual must adjust to the realities and demands of the illness and the treatments. When illness interferes with a person’s mobility and independence, feelings of despair, loss and sadness are normal. They are usually resolved by family support and encouragement. However, in many instances chronic illness is associated with the onset of depression.

Depression

Any chronic condition can trigger depression but the risk increases with the severity of the illness and the level of life disruption it causes. Approximately 25 percent to 33 percent of individuals with a chronic condition will become depressed, significantly higher than the general population.

The rate for depression occurring with chronic illness is quite high. For example:

- **heart attack:** 40 percent to 65 percent
- **coronary artery disease (without heart attack):** 18 percent to 20 percent
- **Parkinson's disease:** 40 percent
- **multiple sclerosis:** 40 percent
- **stroke:** 10 percent to 27 percent
- **cancer:** 25 percent
- **diabetes:** 25 percent

Depression often aggravates the illness, especially if the illness involves pain or fatigue or disrupts social and family functioning. Depression can also intensify pain and cause fatigue that can worsen the loss of energy associated with chronic medical conditions.

Trusting your medical providers

Millions of people who cope with chronic illness are faced with agonizing decisions every day. And they may struggle with a health care system not designed to meet their medical needs or provide necessary information or adequate support.

Having a chronic condition almost always requires many visits to doctors and clinics. Believing in the competence of the medical team can provide much needed peace of mind. The concept of patient and family-centered care is essential in modern medical practice but even more important in managing chronic illness. It is important that you feel comfortable with your care provider.

Learn about your condition

Access to medical information has never been greater. There are countless professional medical resources available on the Web and through your health care provider. Ask your doctor where you can learn more about your condition. Learning about your illness allows you to collaborate with your doctor and take an active role in your treatment. Don't be afraid to ask your doctor questions.

Emotional and spiritual support

Having family and social support improves the perceived quality of life for individuals with chronic conditions. Even during the darkest hours of an illness, just knowing that someone cares and that you are not alone can make all the difference in the world. Nontraditional approaches to illness—including prayer, meditation, relaxation, medically-approved exercise and rhythmic breathing—have been shown to lessen the intensity of some symptoms and improve quality of life.

If you or a family member has a chronic condition, take heart because you are not alone. Ask for help and support from family members, friends or clergy.

Sources:

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Partnership for Solutions. "Better Lives for People with Chronic Conditions," www.chronicnet.org.

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