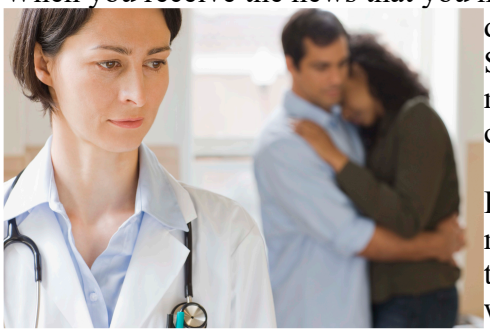
How to cope with a serious medical diagnosis

When you receive the news that you have a serious medical condition – whether it is cancer, heart disease, diabetes or some other condition – it can shake you to the core. Suddenly you're faced with the reality of a health challenge that you may not have expected and you're left riding an emotional roller coaster.



Like losing a loved one, people who are diagnosed with a serious medical condition often experience five stages of grief as they come to terms with their new reality. Understanding the stages and recognizing what you're going through will help keep you focused on your ultimate emotional goal: acceptance and mental well-being.

Recognizing the five steps of coping with a medical diagnosis

Stage 1 – Denial: This is typically the first emotion that surfaces upon receiving your diagnosis. Your first reaction may be: This isn't possible – I don't feel sick! This has to be a mistake – I'm too young for this! At this stage, the blow of the news is ricocheting through your mind as you try to comprehend the reality of the situation. You're in shock.

Stage 2 – Anger: The next stage is even more tumultuous as you start to face what the medical diagnosis will really mean for your life. The sickness, the treatments, the appointments, the life changes all weigh heavily on your mind and you're left wading in a pool of negative thoughts and hostility. You're angry, and your anger may be targeted at the doctor who diagnosed you, family, friends or even random strangers.

Stage 3 – Bargaining: When we feel vulnerable or helpless, our natural reaction is to try and regain control of our life. For some, this means bargaining with a higher power, while others seek a second opinion hoping for different results. Lifestyle changes may creep in at this stage – which can certainly help your overall health – however, they may not change the diagnosis.

Stage 4 – Depression: This stage is characterized by feelings of loneliness and sadness, and you may find yourself pulling away and distancing yourself from loved ones. You'll feel like the people you love and who love you don't understand what you're going through and this can feel extremely isolating; many pull inward as a result. At this stage, many people who have been diagnosed with a serious illness are also mourning the loss of their former self – their healthier self and the life that went with it.

Stage 5 – Acceptance: The final stage is one marked by a sense of calm. While you are not necessarily happy in the traditional sense, you have come to accept the diagnosis and have ceased your internal fight against it. In this stage, you may:

- Accept that your life will be different because of the illness
- Allow yourself to find joy in joyful experiences
- Continue educating yourself about the condition so you can better manage it
- Take steps to improve your health through diet and exercise, understanding that it is not likely to cure your illness but will improve your health in general
- Focus more on gratitude knowing that in many cases there are treatment options available

Receiving a medical diagnosis about a serious illness will always be hard to hear and difficult to accept. While you may not be able to control the physical manifestation of your condition, you can take steps to minimize how it affects you mentally. Allow yourself time to grieve about your diagnosis and recognize the stages as you progress through them, striving for acceptance.