

Coping with chronic illness

Coming to terms with a chronic illness takes a lot of time, energy and effort. It can take you through a range of emotions, including grief, anger, relief, fear and hope, and potentially force you to take stock of your life, the people in it and the world around you.



The power of perception. Several scientific studies have shed light on what many have long suspected: a positive outlook helps people living with chronic illness adapt, physically and psychologically, more quickly and effectively. This 'positiveness' has less to do with a cheery disposition and more about:

control or a sense of having power over personal experience;
commitment or a strong involvement in life's activities; and
challenge or seeing change as a chance to overcome, learn and grow.

Possessing a strong sense of these three elements affects your attitude and how you adjust to the challenges of a chronic ailment. No matter how positive your attitude, there will be moments of darkness and emotional upheaval. Though each person responds to chronic illness differently, the suggestions below can enhance your sense of control, commitment and challenge.

Ask for help. It's often difficult to reach out to others for assistance. You may see it as a sign of weakness or worry about being a "burden". But if a loved one of yours was ill and needed your help, would you hesitate? Many loved ones may want to assist you, but don't know how. Voicing your needs could help you get physical, social and psychological support and lets friends and relatives, who may otherwise feel powerless to help, know exactly what they can do to lend a hand.

Communicate. The diagnosis may leave you feeling very alone and like no one truly understands your situation. Resist the temptation to pull away. Express your feelings and ideas to others. Talking about your emotions can help you unleash stress and let friends and relatives better understand your emotional journey. Open communication encourages loved ones to share in your thought process and to express their own feelings, which they may be afraid or uncomfortable to voice.

Focus on what you can do. Instead of fixating on the things you're no longer physically able to do, think about the things you can still enjoy. Concentrating on your strengths and using positive self-talk will help you maintain your self-confidence during a time when it's needed most.

Explore new ways to relieve tension. If physical limitations mean you can no longer enjoy certain hobbies or physical activities then why not challenge yourself by trying something new? Whether its painting, poetry, swimming or meditation; seize the opportunity to discover a new passion. Delving into new pursuits provides an outlet for stress and gives you the chance to learn and grow.

Seek out support. Meet for coffee with a close friend, join a support group of people living with the same illness or see a counsellor for information and coping strategies. Creating a network of support helps you handle the ups and downs of living with your ailment and reinforces that you're not alone.

Arm yourself with knowledge. Knowledge is power. Seek out as much information as you can about your condition from doctors, medical journals, reputable Web sites and support groups. The better you understand your condition, the more in control you'll be.

Live for today. While it's natural to long for the past, living there can interfere with your ability to adapt to your condition and impede your enjoyment of today. Savour the daily delights that make life joyful.

Set realistic goals. Track progress and create a sense of accomplishment by creating short and long-term goals for yourself. Make sure, however, these markers are in keeping with the realities of your condition. Perhaps you're not able to run a marathon, but you can participate in a 5km walk. Break your goals into manageable chunks and set yourself up for success by ensuring they're attainable.

Explore your spiritual side. Whether you attend religious services, meditate, or volunteer to help those less fortunate, finding greater meaning and purpose in your life can help you physically and emotionally adapt to the challenges of living with illness.

Loss of control, over your body is a major hurdle of living with a chronic illness. But while you may not have control over the way the illness develops and affects your body, you do have control over how you handle these challenges. Learning to cope is an ongoing effort; one that recognizes the difficulties of living with a chronic illness, adjusts to new circumstances, and celebrates the successes along the way.