



Chronic illness

There are many types of chronic illness, from diabetes and AIDS to arthritis and persistent fatigue. While medical science has made great strides in developing effective treatments for the physical effects of these diseases, many victims still face a staggering challenge to their mental and emotional health.

One of the biggest fears is the uncertainty associated with a chronic illness. The condition may be sporadic, lasting only a short while. Or, it could be permanent, gradually worsening over time.

Chronic illness can force many potentially stressful lifestyle changes, such as giving up cherished activities, adapting to new physical limitations and special needs, and paying for what can be expensive medications and treatment services.

Even day-to-day living may be difficult. A study of patients suffering from chronic tension headaches experienced diminished performance in their jobs and social functioning, and were three to fifteen times more likely to be diagnosed with an anxiety or mood disorder.

The need for emotional endurance

Over time, these stresses and negative feelings can rob you of the emotional energy necessary to move forward with your life. Lack of progress in your recovery or worsening symptoms can trigger negative thoughts that heighten feelings of anxiety and sadness, often leading to depression.

Acting quickly to address depression is essential. In studies of patients recently diagnosed with various types of chronic illnesses, the highest risk of depressive symptoms occurred within the first two years. While these symptoms usually diminished, patients with heart disease maintain a significantly higher risk for depression as long as eight years after diagnosis. Physical limitations imposed by heart disease and other chronic illnesses such as arthritis and lung disease are also a common source of depression, particularly among older adults.

Because depression often leads to poor eating habits, lack of exercise, and inconsistent hygiene, it may actually complicate your recovery from a chronic illness and worsen your overall physical condition.

Those battling heart disease are especially at risk. Prolonged depression in patients with cardiovascular disease is a known contributor to subsequent heart attacks and strokes. And heart attack survivors suffering from major depression are three to four times more likely to die within six months.

What to do

Coping with the mental and emotional challenges of a chronic illness requires an approach that is realistic, but also positive. Adapting to your condition or feeling good about the future may seem impossible at first, but it can be done. A recent study of kidney patients undergoing multiple dialysis treatments each week found that their perceived mood and life satisfaction was no different from a control group of healthy people.

A qualified psychologist can help you build the emotional resilience necessary to navigate the difficulties of chronic illness. Working with your physician and other specialists, the psychologist can help develop appropriate coping strategies that will not only reinforce your treatment program, but also help you fulfillment in life regardless of any physical limitations.

Here are some other suggestions for coping with chronic illness:

- Stay connected. Establish and maintain quality relationships with friends and family. Many health organizations also sponsor support groups composed of other people experiencing similar challenges. These groups will not only aid your own well-being, but also provide rewarding opportunities to help others.
- Take care of yourself. Don't allow worries about your illness to get in the way of eating properly, getting rest and exercise, and having fun.

- Maintain a daily routine of work, errands, household chores, and hobbies as much as possible. This will provide you with a feeling of stability amid the chaos and uncertainty of your illness.

The American Psychological Association Practice Directorate gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Rosalind Dorlen, PsyD, ABPP, and the Council on Psychological Health of the New Jersey Psychological Health Association in developing this fact sheet.

Documents from APA Help Center ([./helpcenter/index.aspx](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/index.aspx)) may be reprinted in their entirety with credit given to the American Psychological Association. Any exceptions to this, including requests to excerpt or paraphrase documents from APA Help Center ([./helpcenter/index.aspx](http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/index.aspx)), must be presented in writing to Help Center (<mailto:helping@apa.org>) and will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Permission for exceptions will be given on a one-time-only basis and must be sought for each additional use of the document.

Find this article at:

<http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/chronic.aspx>