



Coping with Serious Chronic Illness

What is a chronic illness? A chronic illness is any illness that is expected to last for months or years and usually cannot be cured. Most older adults have at least one chronic illness, such as high blood pressure, arthritis, or diabetes. Most chronic illnesses can be managed by you and your doctor, but over time a chronic illness can develop into a serious chronic illness.

What Is a Serious Chronic Illness?

A *serious* chronic illness is a condition that affects a person's day-to-day functioning and may even shorten a person's life. Common serious chronic illnesses include cancer, HIV/AIDS, heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), liver disease (cirrhosis), kidney disease, and Alzheimer's disease.

Receiving News of a Serious Chronic Illness

If you are told that you have a medical condition that may change, or even shorten, your life, it can be very upsetting. It's normal to experience many different emotions after receiving such news. Some people experience anxiety, anger, or sadness. Some feel hopeful, and others feel hopeless.

Each person who receives news of a serious illness copes in different ways. On some days, it may be hard to remember that you received the news of a serious illness, but on other days, it never leaves your mind. You may not sleep well, your appetite may be poor, and you may find it impossible to do normal activities.

It may help to remember that these responses are normal and will likely ease with time. The good news is that life can go on, and can be good, even when facing a serious illness.

Ways to Cope

After learning that you have a serious chronic condition, it is common to have many questions. Many people cope better when their questions are answered. Receiving information about how serious the condition is, what treatments are available, and what the future might hold can help a patient and family to cope.

It is good to write down all of your questions and discuss them with your doctor. If you feel more comfortable, bring a family member with you to clinic appointments to get information. Tell your doctor and healthcare team that you want them to communicate with this family member.

Some information is difficult to talk about. For example, a person who becomes aware that his or her illness is serious and could lead to death may want to know how much time is left. The honest answer is that no doctor ever really knows for sure. However, if it is important for you or your family to have an idea, your doctor often knows enough about your illness to offer some guidance. For example, a doctor may say that a patient with this illness is likely to live for a period of months or even years.

However, a doctor may not want to provide any time frame, because it depends on how the treatments work or how the disease progresses. If doctors really don't know, they will say so. However, if it is important to you or your family to understand what the future might hold, don't hesitate to ask and to ask again if the first answer doesn't provide the information you need.

Enjoy Quality Time

After going through a period of feeling distressed, most people with a serious chronic illness usually begin to cope better. It is important to do things that can help you experience a better quality of life, even though things are different than before.

Try to find activities that you can enjoy every day, and set realistic short-term goals for yourself. Do things that engage your mind and bring you happiness or peace, such as reading a book, watching a movie, taking a walk, or visiting or talking on the phone with friends or family. Make plans for doing activities that you and your family enjoy together.

Find Support in Your Family and Community

You can reduce stress by letting go of unnecessary chores. You may need to ask for help from family and friends. Many people are active in a faith community and would feel supported if the clergy or other members of your community were more involved. You or your family will need to let them know about your condition.

A serious illness can be stressful for the entire family, and it's not unusual to experience strain and conflict

in relationships. If this happens, try to see things from another's point of view, and talk to your family members about your illness and what it means to you and them. You should also encourage your family members to take care of themselves, especially if they help care for you at home.

Support from Your Healthcare Team

Here are a few suggestions on working effectively with your healthcare team:

- Make sure there is clear communication between you and your doctor.
- Ask your healthcare team what you can do to control the symptoms of your illness.
- Keep clinic appointments, especially if you are not feeling well.
- Stick to the plan discussed with your doctor.

How to Find Help

If you continue to have distress and difficulty coping with a serious chronic illness, you should tell your doctor. Your doctor may suggest ways to help, including referring you to a professional for counseling or to a support group.

Patient Education Series

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If you would like help in connecting with resources, talk to the doctor, nurse or social worker at your health center.