



STRESS MANAGEMENT FOR CHRONIC DISEASES

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OUTLINE

- 1. Chronic illness and stress**
 - a) Identify new stressors**
- 2. Accepting, educating and understanding the chronic illness**
 - a) Learning your body and becoming mindful**
- 3. Self-managing the chronic illness**
 - a) Empowerment**
 - b) Self- responsibility**
 - c) Attitude, emotions and relationships**
- 4. Managing Emotions**
 - a) Identifying-being mindful of emotions**
 - b) Regulating and processing positive and negative emotions**
 - c) Techniques to help manage emotions**
- 5. Relationships and Communication**
 - a) Managing relationships to your physical needs**
 - b) Supportive people vs. unsupportive people**
 - c) Communicate your needs to others**
 - d) Let go of what isn't helpful to you or for you**

Battling the Stress of Living with Chronic Illness

Being diagnosed with a long-term health condition can be frightening and disorienting. Once you move beyond the initial shock of your diagnosis, it's helpful to learn how to cope with the daily stresses of living with your illness.

Everyone is susceptible to the effects of stress. However, living with a long-term condition can make you particularly vulnerable. In addition to the everyday challenges that most people face, chronic illness adds new layers of stressors. For example, you may need to:

cope with pain or discomfort from your symptoms

take steps to manage your condition and practice self-care

adjust to new limitations that your condition puts on your life

manage increased financial pressures

cope with feelings of frustration, confusion, or isolation

You can take steps to maximize your quality of life and minimize the challenges of living with a long-term illness. Use the following strategies to help you cope and regain control.

Understand Your Condition (Education)

When you're living with a long-term condition, it can be helpful to learn everything you can about your symptoms and treatment options. **Ask your doctor specific questions about your condition, but don't stop there. Your local library and patient associations for specific conditions are excellent resources for increasing your knowledge base.** You can also find information online, although some sources are more accurate and reliable than others.

Observe your own body too. Pay close attention to what seems to ease your symptoms or make them worse. Use a notebook or calendar to record trends and other insights that might help you manage your symptoms. Share your notes with your doctor so your healthcare team can better understand how your condition affects you.

Become a Self-Manager (Empowerment & Responsibility)

Serving as the day-to-day manager of your own health may help you gain a sense of control and improve your quality of life. Following your recommended treatment plan may help keep your symptoms and stress in check. For example, it's important to take prescribed medications as directed and attend scheduled healthcare appointments. It may help to set up a reminder system in your calendar, daily planner, or smartphone.

Other daily decisions that affect your actions and lifestyle can shape how effectively you circumvent stress. For example, eating nutritious foods and getting enough exercise may help boost your mood, improve your mobility, and ease your symptoms. You should also take steps to manage your attitude, emotions, and relationships.

Manage Emotions (Regulation and Processing Feelings)

The all-encompassing nature of chronic illness, and the ways it disrupts your life and plans, can elicit a wide range of emotions. These responses may include:

stress

grief

rage

fear

depression

anxiety

Experiment with different ways of managing stress and painful emotions. When you find a technique that works, incorporate it into your daily or weekly routine. Some ideas include:

exercising

stretching

listening to music

deep breathing

meditation

writing in a journal

gratitude

cooking

reading

spending quality time with family and friends

It may help to schedule time in your calendar for regular breaks and self-care.

Manage Relationships (Assertive Communication)

Relationship management is also important when you have a chronic condition. You may find that you have limited energy and time available for socializing. Some friends or family members may not understand the challenges you're facing.

Making smart choices about where to focus your time and energy can help you live your best possible life. Focus on the relationships that are most important to you. Let go of relationships that add more stress than support to your life. **Assertively ask for what you need and want.**

Develop Adaptability

Attitude and approach can make a big difference to your quality of life. It's important to develop a healthy acceptance of the lifestyle changes that your condition requires. It also helps to develop confidence in your ability to live within these constraints.

You can take control of your life in ways that make a difference to your everyday experience by approaching your condition with adaptability and confidence. Develop new skills and habits and take a problem-solving approach to figure out what works best for you. You'll be better able to manage challenges as they arise.

The Takeaway

Living with chronic illness can be stressful, but you can take steps to manage your condition and maintain good quality of life. Learn as much as you can about your illness and treatment needs. Be proactive about following your treatment plan and leading a healthy lifestyle. Make time for activities and relationships that leave you feeling happier and supported, while avoiding people and things that stress you out. By adjusting your expectations and practicing self-care, you can make your health and well-being a priority.

Article Resources:

-Chronic illness. (2016, January 20)

my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases_conditions/hic_Coping_With_Chronic_Illnesses

-Coping with a diagnosis of chronic illness. (2013, August)

apa.org/helpcenter/chronic-illness.aspx

NOW

- Notice:** Where my attention is.
- Observe:** What I'm doing. Say to myself: "I am walking, "I am sitting I am breathing", then notice those sensations in your body.
- Wise Mind:** What now? How shall I continue? Doing or Being?

If you want an explanation for your present, look at your past.

If you want to know your future, look at your present.

Buddha

Mindfulness for Busy People

- *Choose an activity to do mindfully throughout the day for 1-2 minutes: drink tea, walk, washing dishes, etc.
- *Whatever you are doing, be in that moment, right now. See, hear, smell, touch, feel, breathe.
- *Simply notice whenever other thoughts and sensations come to mind, then refocus on your chosen mindful activity.
- *Be patient and compassionate with yourself.
- *Describe...rather than judge good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant.
- *It is as it is.
- *It will pass.

MINDFULNESS TOOLS FOR PAIN

Creating a Comfort Box

The ‘comfort box’ is a tool designed to ‘focus away’ and distract your mind from your pain onto something that is more pleasant. This requires an intentional shift in your thoughts, attention and behavior. The comfort box should contain all different ideas and ways that you can find comfort to create distance from pain and shift your attention onto something that is pleasurable for you. The comfort box can be any type of container you wish to use.

Use 2 different kinds of distractions: comfort activities and comfort items. These will go in your comfort box.

Comfort Activities

Write your favorite activities on a sheet of paper and put in the comfort box. Tailor the activity to what is manageable for you. Examples:

Reading, drawing, cooking, playing cards, watching T.V., doing a puzzle, arts/crafts, talking or visiting with a friend, spending time with your pet, writing, gardening, meditating/praying, exercising, learning something new,

deep breathing, playing games, taking a relaxing drive, drinking a warm or cold beverage, wearing your favorite clothes, sitting by a fire or favorite outdoor place, etc.

Comfort Items

Put your favorite comfort items in your comfort box.

Examples: scented candle, favorite photos, prayer beads, poem/book, music CD, favorite puzzle, jewelry, favorite candy bar or treats, favorite object (spiritual object, something someone made for you or gave to you), something of your favorite color, comfortable blanket or pillow, stuffed animal or toy, favorite lotion or perfume, inspirational quote, etc.

Rate your pain level on a scale of 1-10 where 1 is the lowest pain to 10 is the highest pain. Score your pain level before using the comfort activity/comfort item, then score again after you've completed the activity or used the comfort item. Remember to use the activity or item for a long enough time to make it effective. You may find that certain activities work better when the pain level is lowest while others work best when pain level is highest. Consistency is key!

Before: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comfort Activity/Item Used: _____

After: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10