

Tip Sheet: Living with Chronic Illness

Learning that you have a chronic illness can bring up many different feelings. Learn about common emotions you might have when you are diagnosed and live with a chronic illness, how to support yourself, and where to go for more support.

Getting Used to Chronic Illness

It can be a shock to learn you have a chronic illness. You may ask, “Why me?” or “Where did it come from?” Sometimes nothing can explain why you got the illness. The illness may run in your family, or you may have been exposed to something that caused the illness. As you learn more about your illness and how to take care of yourself, your feelings may change. Fear or shock may give way to

- Anger because you have the illness
- Sadness or depression because you may not be able to live the way you used to
- Confusion or stress about how to take care of yourself

Your image of yourself may change.

You may feel like you are not a whole person anymore. You might be embarrassed or ashamed that you have an illness. Know that, with time, your illness becomes part of you and you will have a new normal. You will learn to live with your illness. You will get used to your new normal. For example:

- A person with diabetes learns to test his or her blood sugar and give insulin several times a day—This becomes his or her new normal.
- A person with asthma will carry an inhaler and avoid things that may cause an asthma attack—This is his or her new normal.

Expect to feel overwhelmed.

You may be overwhelmed by how much there is to learn and what lifestyle changes you need to make. For example, you may be trying to change your diet, quit smoking, and exercise.

Be gentle with yourself.

- Know that you will adapt over time. You will feel like yourself again as you learn how to fit your illness into your life.
- Know that what may be confusing at first starts to make sense. Give yourself time to learn how to take care of your illness.

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Feelings and Emotions Over Time

Know that it takes a lot of energy to manage your chronic illness every day. Sometimes, this can affect your outlook and mood. Sometimes you may feel very alone. This is especially true during times your illness is harder to manage. You may sometimes feel some of the feelings you had when you first got the illness.

- You may feel depressed that you have the illness. It feels that life will never be OK again.
- You may feel angry. It still seems unfair that you have the illness.
- You may feel afraid that you will become very ill over time.

Know that your range of feelings is normal. Stress can make it harder for you to take care of your chronic illness. You can learn to cope with stress to help you manage day to day. Find ways that work for you to decrease stress and that you may even enjoy. Here are some ideas:

- Go for a walk.
- Read a book or watch a movie.
- Try yoga, tai chi, or meditation.
- Take an art class, play an instrument, or listen to music.
- Call or spend time with a friend.

Learn more about your illness.

- Learn how to live with your chronic illness. At first it might seem like it is controlling you, but the more you learn and can do for yourself, the more normal and in control you will feel.
- Know more about your illness so you can manage it and feel better about it. Find information on the Internet, at a library, and from social networks, support groups, national organizations, and local hospitals.
- Ask your doctor or nurse for Web sites you can trust. Not all the information you find online is from reliable sources.

SupportLinc can help.

Call today for professional support, resources and referrals to help you through this time. Counselors are available 24/7 at 888-881-LINC (5462) or visit the website at www.supportlinc.com.

U.S. National Institutes of Health, National Library of Medicine. (Updated 2015, January 12). *Living with a chronic illness: Dealing with feelings*. Retrieved February 2, 2015, from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>