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Katy's Korner

Dealing with the Stress of Chronic Disease

Many of us will be diagnosed with a chronic condition in our lifetime, or at least know or care for someone else who has one. A chronic illness is ongoing. It affects your health over a long period of time--possibly your entire life. In many cases, there is no way to cure a chronic illness. [Diabetes](#), asthma, and [high blood pressure](#) are examples of chronic illnesses.

What can YOU do to take care of your health if you have a chronic illness?

It's important to understand that your chronic illness is a serious problem. If you don't believe this, you'll never be motivated to manage your illness effectively. Managing your illness involves making lifestyle choices and using prescribed medical treatments to be as healthy as possible. Unless you take care of your body, your chronic illness can cause more problems in the future.

When you have a chronic health problem, it's easy to feel overwhelmed and helpless, as if the illness has taken over your life. For example, you may need to take daily insulin injections, use an inhaler or monitor your blood pressure. However, you can take steps to control the negative effects of a chronic illness on your health. One method of taking control is called "**self-management.**"

What is self-management of chronic illness?

Self-management of chronic illness means that you take responsibility for doing what it takes to manage your illness effectively. It's important for you to be responsible for your health because the treatment recommendations your provider makes won't do any good unless you follow them. Providers cannot make decisions for you or make you change your behavior. Only **you** can do these things.

In self-management, you and your provider are partners in care. Your provider can provide valuable advice and information to help you deal with your illness. However, the treatment plan that works best for one person with your condition won't necessarily work best for you. Talk to your provider about the different treatment options available and help them create a plan that's right for you. After all, nobody knows more than you do about your feelings, your actions and how your health problems affect you.

As part of self-management, it's also your responsibility to ask for the help you need to deal with your illness. This support can come from friends and family members, as well as from your provider or a support group for people with your health problem.

How can self-management help a person who has a chronic illness?

Once you've decided to take an active role in managing your illness, you and your provider can work together to set goals that will lead to better health. These goals will be part of an overall treatment plan.

Pick a problem. Take an honest look at the unhealthy aspects of your lifestyle. Start with a particular behavior that you'd like to change in order to have better control of your illness. For example, you might decide that you don't eat enough vegetables, get enough exercise or take your medicines as your doctor tells you to.

Get specific. Once you've identified a problem, state a specific goal for dealing with it. The more specific your goal is, the more likely you are to succeed. For example, instead of saying, "I'm going to exercise more," decide what kind of exercise you'll do. Be specific about what days of the week you'll exercise and what times you'll exercise on those days. Your new goal might be: "During my lunch hour on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, I'm going to walk 1 mile in the park."

Plan ahead. After you've stated your goal, think of things that could go wrong and plan how you'll deal with them. For example, if it rains and you can't go to the park, where will you go to walk? If you plan how to handle problems in advance, they won't prevent you from meeting your goals.

Check your confidence level. Ask yourself, "How confident am I that I'll be able to meet this goal?" If the answer is "Not very confident," you may need to start with a more realistic goal.

Follow up. As you're working toward your goal, check in regularly with your provider to let him or her know how you're doing. If you're having trouble following the plan, talk to your provider to figure out why. Your setbacks can be learning experiences that help you make a new plan for success.

One of the most important things to remember is that you *can* change your behavior. Even though your illness makes you feel helpless at times, if you work with your provider to set goals and you take responsibility for following through with them, you can make changes that will lead to better health.

Every person is different, of course, and every person's disease or condition will affect them differently. But research shows that after getting a diagnosis, many people have some of the same reactions and needs.

Five Basic Steps to Deal with the Stress

Try these five basic steps to help you cope with your diagnosis, make decisions, and get on with your life.

Step 1: Take the time you need. Do not rush important decisions about your health. In most cases, you will have time to carefully examine your options and decide what is best for you.

Step 2: Get the support you need. Look for support from family and friends, people who are going through the same thing you are, and those who have "been there." Bring friends and family to appointments if you need another person there to help you with the information. They can help you cope with your situation and make informed decisions. If needed, seek professional counseling and community resources.

Step 3: Talk with your provider. Good communication with your provider can help you feel more satisfied with the care you receive. Write down questions and bring them to appointments with your provider or other recommended specialists. Keep written documentation of things that have been advised, tests you have had done and dates, lab results, and any other information like blood pressure, weight, or blood sugars that will help your provider help you. Research shows it can even have a positive effect on things such as symptoms and pain. Getting a "second opinion" may help you feel more confident about your care.

Step 4: Seek out information. When learning about your health problem and its treatment, look for information that is based on a careful review of the latest scientific findings published in medical journals. Your local clinic should also have patient information that you can take home and read, so be sure to ask for those materials.

Step 5: Decide on a treatment plan. Work with your provider to decide on a treatment plan that best meets your needs. Let your provider know what works and what doesn't and why. They will not know about struggles you have unless you tell them. Treatment plans should change to adjust to your needs.

As you take each step, remember this: Research shows that patients who are more involved in their health care tend to get better results and be more satisfied.