



COPING WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS

Strategies for Patients

You never fully appreciated your health until you had to face the fact you now have an illness that's not going away. You feel angry and depressed. It's hard to get beyond the question, "Why me?" How can you learn to cope more successfully with your condition?

Effects of Chronic Illness

Chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and kidney disease, can't, as yet, be cured. However, they can often be controlled with carefully followed dietary, exercise and medication regimens. Once past the shock and despair, people with chronic illnesses often find that their condition requires that they live healthier, more health-conscious lives.

People commonly go through a five-stage grieving and adjustment period as they learn to accept a chronic illness. There are feelings of grief, powerlessness and fear. This is natural as you move through the stages. There's no fixed time schedule or order for your passage through the stages of adjustment, and many times the stages overlap. Sometimes you may feel you're experiencing several of the stages at once. This, too, is a normal part of one's progress toward the final stage of acceptance .



DENIAL



ANGER



DEPRESSION



BARGAINING



ACCEPTANCE

The Five Stages of Acceptance

1. DENIAL. You're not ready to deal with the loss of your good health, so you deny your illness. You may feel that the doctor got the wrong lab report. You deny the seriousness of the condition; you're not going to let it concern you. This denial can take a dangerously defiant form. Statements like, "I'm going to eat, exercise and take or not take my medications just as I please!" mustn't become rules of behavior. Teenage diabetics are often great deniers of their condition and can get themselves into serious trouble if adults don't intervene.

2. ANGER. You're mad at everything and everyone. "I paid my dues, had my yearly checkups and went to church on Sundays. It isn't fair!" People around you seem to go on as if your problem doesn't exist, and that makes you mad. Or worse yet, they hover around you, telling you how to live your life, acting as if you already have one foot in the grave. If you stay in this stage you'll become bitter, and people will begin to avoid you.

3. DEPRESSION. The problem really hits you. You cry, feel sorry for yourself and generally give up. You find no joy in anything. Sorrow can lead to depression and hopelessness. These feelings can become self-destructive.

4. BARGAINING. You make a last attempt at reaching a compromise with reality. "If I only overeat on weekends, that won't be too bad." "If I give more to charity, I won't have another heart attack." The danger of remaining in this stage is due to the fact that chronic illnesses don't make deals and don't accept bribes.

5. ACCEPTANCE. Having gone through the previous four stages, you now accept your illness as part of your self, a reality to be lived with, not escaped. You recognize that your best chance for future happiness lies in your understanding of your condition, and your disciplined commitment to its control.

When to Seek Help

If you find yourself stuck in any stage before acceptance, you can benefit from professional help. And after acceptance comes, such help is still valuable. Find a counselor who will respect your wishes and work with you as a partner. Join a support group. Take care of yourself. You can begin to take control of your illness instead of letting it control you.