

Coping with Depression When You Have a Chronic Condition

Overview

Ways to cope if you are experiencing one or more chronic health conditions and depression.

- The link between chronic conditions and depression
- Warning signs of depression
- Managing a chronic condition and depression

More than one in three adults in the U.S. has at least one chronic health condition, such as arthritis or heart disease. Coping with the daily challenges of living with a chronic condition can be hard. Many people with a chronic condition have bad days or bad weeks related to their condition, and this can affect emotional health. Over a period of time, some people experience depression that is related to their condition.

It is important to understand that depression is not inevitable when you have a chronic condition. However, the combined effects of a health concern and depression can reduce your energy and your ability to work, enjoy life, and maintain relationships. There are many ways to treat or manage depression, and these can also make it easier to cope with other health concerns. Following are strategies you can use and behavior changes you can make to cope with depression when you have a chronic condition so that you can feel better overall.

The link between chronic conditions and depression

A chronic health condition is an illness or disability that lasts for a long time -- typically, a year or more. Some chronic conditions, like asthma or neck or back problems, may seem to go away for a while. Others, like diabetes or osteoporosis, never go away. Either way, a chronic condition differs from an acute condition such as strep throat or appendicitis, which usually resolve with medical treatment.

Many people become depressed after learning that they have a chronic condition. For example, research has shown that about one-fifth of people with heart disease suffer from depression. The statistics are similar for people who have had strokes: About 15 to 40 percent have symptoms of depression within two months. Depression is also common among people with multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's disease, and diabetes. But any chronic condition can cause depression, and the risk increases with the seriousness of the illness. In addition, some medications may increase the risk of depression, as may some of the highs and the lows of the illness itself.

The combined effects of depression and a chronic condition can make it harder to work and maintain relationships. A chronic condition can be depressing, and depression can make the illness worse. Depression can also

interfere with your ability to follow instructions about taking medication or maintaining a specific diet or exercise routine.

The important thing to remember is that you don't have to live with depression if you have a chronic illness. The key to overcoming depression is to acknowledge it and seek help.

- *Acknowledge that you are feeling sad.* You may be grieving for a part of your health that you have lost or for things that you can no longer do. Or you may be worried about medical bills or the effect of your illness on your family.
- *Become familiar with the warning signs of depression.* These are listed below.
- *Recognize that depression is treatable.* Depression can be treated with medication or psychotherapy ("talk therapy") or a combination of both. You may need to try more than one approach to find the one that works best for you.
- *Seek professional help.* Talk to your doctor or health care provider. Your physician needs to know if you are feeling depressed. Your employee assistance program (EAP) also provides help for many issues and concerns, including depression.

Warning signs of depression

The common symptoms of depression include

- persistent sadness or feeling low frequently
- little or no interest in activities you used to enjoy, including sex
- eating too much or too little, or weight gain or weight loss
- insomnia or sleeping too much or too little
- trouble concentrating or making decisions
- feeling very tired or low energy much of the time
- pain or physical problems that don't seem to relate to your chronic condition
- avoiding people you care about, such as family, friends, or co-workers
- feelings of hopelessness
- feeling overwhelmed by problems

If you have any of these signs, it's important to let your doctor know. Don't assume your symptoms are to be expected or that they are just another result of the condition that has already been diagnosed. The symptoms may mean that you are suffering from depression. If so, your depression may require its own treatment, separate from your treatment for your chronic condition. If you

don't get help, the symptoms of depression may persist even if your chronic condition is under control. Failure to treat the accompanying depression may also keep your chronic condition from staying under control, particularly with diseases such as diabetes.

If you are depressed, your doctor may prescribe a medication to ease your symptoms or refer you to a specialist who can help with a specific concern, such as pain management or dealing with the strain that an illness may place on your relationships.

If you have thoughts of death or suicide, get help immediately.

Managing a chronic condition and depression

Many people have full and rewarding lives while living with one or more chronic conditions and depression. The best way to move forward is to take an active role in managing your physical and emotional health.

- *Develop a plan for managing your health.* Work closely with your doctor and other health care professionals to draw up a plan for meeting all your physical and emotional needs. The plan might cover such things as diet, exercise, sleep, medications, vitamins, counseling, and medical checkups. Let your doctor know if you have trouble following any part of the plan so that the two of you can make any needed revisions.
- *Make sure that any medical specialists you are seeing are in touch with each other to work together.* Medications prescribed by physicians for individual chronic conditions may interact and may worsen symptoms of depression. It is important to continue to see your primary care physician so that he or she can coordinate your care from all of your medical and mental health specialists.
- *Get help for chronic pain.* Acknowledge your pain, take it seriously, and find a doctor who does, too. If your medication isn't working, your doctor should be willing to consider other approaches -- for example, prescribing a different medication or referring you to a pain management center or clinic. In addition, many respected hospitals now have on-site centers of alternative or complementary medicine that offer classes or workshops on nontraditional techniques that may be beneficial, such as yoga, acupuncture, healing touch, or meditation.
- *Focus on what you can control, not on what you can't.* You may face limitations after you develop a chronic condition. But there may still be many things you can do to bring joy into your life. Seek out new activities to replace any you've had to give up. If your arthritis means you can no longer ski or work in the yard, you might consider walking or swimming. Many YMCAs and community centers have sports programs for people with physical limitations.

- *Set goals that you can achieve.* Realistic goals will help you avoid feeling overwhelmed by your condition. You may find it helpful to set three kinds of goals -- short-term (those you could achieve right now), mid-term (those you might reach in three to six months), and long-term (those that may take a year or more to achieve). Share your goals with a close friend or relative who can encourage you when you face setbacks.
- *Keep track of your progress.* List your goals in a spot where you can see them. Then record your progress in a notebook, on a computer, or on a calendar. You may find it easier to reach your goals if you build rewards into your system. If you need to lose weight to control your diabetes, you might splurge on a new item of clothing or something else you've been wanting when you reach a big goal.
- *Learn as much as you can about your condition.* Visit a library or bookstore and look for books, magazine and newspaper articles, or videos or CDs about it. Or ask a librarian to help you find reliable medical databases and other good sources on the Internet. You might begin by going to the online resource www.healthfinder.gov, a government site with a vast array of information about health concerns. Learning about your condition will help you stay up-to-date on new treatments or products that may make your life easier.
- *Talk about your experiences with people you trust.* This will help people give you the kind of support you need most. If you are experiencing both a chronic condition and depression, explain this to your family, close friends, and others you trust, such as clergy members. Let them know what kind of support would be most helpful to you, such as rides to doctor's appointments or help with installing handrails in your home. Allow people to help you with meals, laundry, or household chores. People may misinterpret your actions if you try to hide your condition. For example, if you avoided friends because you were depressed and you didn't explain this, they may think you don't care about them.
- *Get in touch with national organizations and support groups.* Almost every common physical or mental health condition has a national organization devoted to it. Most organizations have Web sites that provide or offer links to extensive resources -- publications, mailing lists, message boards that let you talk online to others with your condition. National associations may also be able to help you find support groups for people with your illness or for their caregivers or families. To find a national organization, search the Internet for the name of your health condition and the word "organization" or "association."
- *Explore community resources.* You may qualify for programs or services you didn't expect, such as free or low-cost transportation or meal-delivery programs sponsored by government agencies or religious and nonprofit

groups. Even if you don't need these services now, you may have more peace of mind if you know where you could find help in the future. You might begin by calling a local hospital or your state or local department of social services. Check your community newspaper for listings of volunteer groups that may provide free services or other aid to people who have illnesses or disabilities.

- *Spend time with people who are positive and enthusiastic about life.* Optimism is contagious. If you spend time with people who have remained upbeat despite their own setbacks, you'll feel better than if you surround yourself with complainers and pessimists. Try to enjoy some activities that involve children or other young people who have a natural enthusiasm for life.
- *Finally, look for ways to keep giving to others.* At times you may feel overwhelmed by your condition. One way to keep your health in perspective is to help some of the people who need *you*. Can you volunteer at a food bank or a local hospital? Read to children or visit an older adult who is alone?

When you have a chronic condition, you may not be able to do all the things you used to do. But if you focus on moving forward by taking an active role in managing your physical and emotional health, you will feel better overall.

This information is provided to supplement the care provided by your physician or mental health professional and is not to be used as a substitute for professional medical advice. Always seek the advice of your physician or another qualified health or mental health professional if you have questions about a medical condition or plan of treatment.

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