

Living with a chronic health condition

Have you been diagnosed with a chronic health condition? Wondering how you'll cope?

Chronic illnesses are mostly characterised by a condition that is long lasting, has complex causes, many risk factors, a long latency period, and which has a functional impairment or disability. A diagnosis of a chronic health condition such as diabetes, osteoporosis or arthritis can be very stressful and leave you feeling like you are riding a rollercoaster of emotions.

Once you have moved past the initial shock of your diagnosis, you need to learn to manage both your condition and the stress of having the condition. It is not easy trying to deal with multiple aspects of your condition such as the physical pain and discomfort, adjusting to your new physical limitations, managing increased financial pressures, and coping with feelings of frustration, confusion and isolation while navigating a new and complex healthcare system.

Chronic pain and comorbidity with depression and anxiety

With decreases in functioning, poor treatment responses, and increased healthcare costs, chronic pain and mental health issues are often co-occurring. In fact, 30–40% of patients with chronic pain, also experience symptoms of depression¹. Depression and pain can be associated in several ways; first, the physical pain coupled with reductions in functioning and increased social isolation may trigger a depressive episode, secondly, the presence of depression or anxiety may decrease initial tolerance to pain thereby increasing susceptibility to a chronic pain condition, or alternatively, both may be symptoms of a common underlying disorder.

Regardless as to the initial cause, the maladaptive thought patterns that perpetuate depression and anxiety can exacerbate feelings of pain. Therefore, it is important to both assess and treat any co-occurring mental health issue. A combination of medication and psychological therapies, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) are likely to have the greatest impact.

How do I cope with a chronic illness?

Dealing with your diagnosis head on may be confronting, but it will help you to understand, manage and adjust to your illness.

Writing down questions for your treating health professionals, setting goals and making a treatment plan are all good ways to confront and cope with your illness.

Ways to reduce the stress

There are a few ways to reduce the stress surrounding your diagnosis these include:

- 1. Understand your condition:** Learn everything you can about your symptoms and treatment options, get specific information from your doctors, visit your local library, access support groups, and find online groups to increase your knowledge base. Keeping a diary of your symptoms so you can track when they improve or worsen based on activities or food you have eaten etc, may also be helpful when discussing your treatment with health professionals.
- 2. Self-management of your condition:** Gain control of you own health (as much as possible) by managing your condition day to day. Planning your day, managing your symptoms and treatment schedules by keeping diaries, and using reminders for appointments will also be helpful. Extending aspects of your life that you can control such as your diet and exercise, as well as attitude, mood and emotions may help to ease your symptoms.
- 3. Manage your emotions:** Chronic illness filters through many aspects of your life and can significantly impact on your emotions. Some emotional reactions may include:

- stress
- grief
- rage
- fear
- depression
- anxiety.

Coping strategies to better manage stress and emotions include:

- exercising
- stretching
- listening to music
- deep breathing
- meditation
- writing in a journal
- cooking
- reading
- spending quality time with family and friends.

¹ A. Holmes et al (2012)

4. **Manage relationships:** It is important to limit stress and maintain your relationships. If your illness impacts upon your energy levels, focus your time and energy on people that add more to your life and support you. Minimise contact with people that create stress.
5. **Develop adaptability:** Taking control of your life and trying to remain positive can greatly improve your quality of life. It can also help maintain your confidence in engaging with your friends, family and treating professionals. 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.

Life threatening diagnosis

Being diagnosed with a life-threatening or terminal disease is likely to trigger feelings of fear and grief. More than ever, it is important to surround yourself with positive and supportive people. Try to find small things that you can enjoy every day, and set realistic short-term goals for yourself. Even small goals such as a visit to a park or museum, or a phone call with a close friend, can help you make the most of each day.

Where to go to for support?

It can be difficult to know what to do and how to cope, but help is available.

- **Contact Lifeline:** 13 11 14 (available 24/7) or Online Crisis Support Chat (available nightly at www.lifeline.org.au)
- **Use available resources** — smartphone apps, online support groups
- **Talk to someone you trust** — you don't have to go through this alone. Tell them how you feel. Ask them to help you.
- **Get help and support to stay alive** — contact a helpline, your GP, a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist, a hospital emergency department, minister, teacher or anyone you trust to keep you safe.
- **If your life is in danger** — call emergency services 000.

For local services and centres in your area or for services specific to your condition, visit the Lifeline Service Seeker Directory at www.lifeline.serviceseeker.com.au.



Top 12 major chronic health conditions are:

- coronary heart disease
- stroke
- lung cancer
- colorectal cancer
- depression
- type 2 diabetes
- arthritis
- osteoporosis
- asthma
- chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- chronic kidney disease
- oral disease.

How will I cope?

- Knowledge is power — find out about your illness
- Surround yourself with supportive people
- Set short term goals
- Discuss possible outcomes so you can prepare

The aim of these suggestions is to stop you feeling helpless and out of control. You can gain some certainty, power and control over your condition.

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A chronic health condition can be very stressful, but there are ways to manage. It is important to manage your stress so that this does not affect the way you deal with your condition and its treatment.



Phone 13 11 14 | www.lifeline.org.au

Call Lifeline on 13 11 14 (available 24/7) if you are feeling suicidal or in crisis or visit www.lifeline.org.au to connect online with our Crisis Support Chat (available nightly), find a range of other useful factsheets and to find local services in your area.

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