

# Chronic Illness

An individual counselor or a support group can help you deal with the stress, pain, and fatigue that may accompany a chronic illness. Signals that you are less able to cope include disturbed sleep, body aches, anxiety, and irritability. It is best to seek help early.

## What is a chronic illness?

Chronic illnesses last a long time, often for a year or more. You may also have a need for ongoing medical care and difficulties doing the things you need to do every day. These behaviors, called [activities of daily living](#), include things like using the toilet and getting dressed. These difficulties can also affect your family. Examples of chronic diseases include diabetes and chronic lung disease, such as [COPD](#).

## Why can coping with a chronic illness be so difficult?

When you have an acute illness such as [bronchitis](#) or the [flu](#), you know you'll feel better and be back to normal within a short period of time. This isn't true with a chronic illness. It may never go away and can disrupt your life in a number of ways.

## What are some effects of a chronic illness?

Chronic illnesses have disease-specific symptoms, but may also bring invisible symptoms like pain, fatigue and [mood disorders](#). Pain and fatigue may become a frequent part of your day. Along with your illness, you probably have certain things you have to do take care of yourself, like take medicine or do exercises. Keeping up with your health management tasks might also cause stress.

Physical changes from a disease may affect your appearance. These changes can turn a positive self-image into a poor one. When you don't feel good about yourself, you may

withdraw from friends and social activities. Mood disorders such as [depression and anxiety](#) are common complaints of people with chronic conditions, but they're extremely treatable.

Chronic illness can also influence your ability to work. You might have to change the way you work to cope with morning stiffness, decreased range of motion and other physical limitations. If you aren't able to work, you might have financial difficulties.

If you're a homemaker, your work may take much longer to do. You might need to ask for help from your spouse, a relative, or a home healthcare provider. As your life changes, you may feel a loss of control, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future. In some families, there could be a role reversal where people who were able to stay at home must return to work.

[Stress](#) can build and can shape your feelings about life. Long periods of stress can lead to frustration, anger, hopelessness, and, at times, depression. This can happen not only to you, but also to your family members. They're also influenced by the chronic health problems of a loved one.

## When should I seek help to cope with my chronic illness?

The following is a checklist of the sources and signals of stress that you may experience with chronic illness. Seek help from a mental health provider as early as possible to help you understand and cope with your illness better.

### Your sources of stress:

- Chronic illness.
- Uncertainty about the future.
- Unpredictability of the disease.
- Disability.
- Financial difficulties.

### Stress symptoms:

- Irritability and difficulty in relationships.
- Anxiety, tension, sadness.
- Loss of interest in things you once enjoyed.
- Disturbed sleep.
- Fatigue.
- Body aches and pains, including [headaches](#).
- Cognitive issues.

## If I have a chronic illness, how can I make my life better?

The most important step you can take is to seek help as soon as you feel less able to cope. Taking action early will help you understand and deal with the many effects of a chronic illness.

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Learning to manage stress will help you to maintain a positive physical, emotional and spiritual outlook on life.

If you ask for help from a mental health provider, the two of you can design a treatment plan to meet your specific needs. These strategies can help you regain a sense of control and improve your quality of life—something everyone deserves. If you're suffering from depression, your provider may prescribe medications to help regulate your mood and make you feel better.

There are, of course, things that you can do on your own that will help. These include tips such as:

- Eating a healthy diet.
- Getting as much physical activity as you can.
- Avoiding negative coping mechanisms like alcohol and substance abuse.
- Exploring stress-relief activities like meditation.
- Letting of obligations that you don't really need to do or want to do.
- Asking for help when you need it.
- Staying in touch with family and friends.

## What kind of help is available for someone with a chronic illness?

You can find help for stress related to chronic illness. Counseling options include support groups, individual counseling and/or family and couples counseling.

### Support groups

Support groups are a useful sharing experience. They provide an environment where you can learn new ways of dealing with your illness from other people's coping strategies. You may want to share your own approaches, too. You'll know that you aren't facing hardships alone. You can often find these groups by contacting a nonprofit organization that is dedicated to your specific disease.

### Individual counseling

Sometimes people have problems that are better addressed in a one-on-one setting. By taking part in individual counseling, you may more effectively express sensitive or private feelings you have about your illness and its impact on your lifestyle and relationships. There is a specific group of trained of mental health providers who have extensive training in coping with chronic illnesses.

### Family and couples counseling

A chronic illness often affects the family unit. It's important to find a family or couples-trained mental health provider in these cases.

### A note from Cleveland Clinic

Chronic illness affects many people in the U.S. and worldwide. Each has its own symptoms. If you have a chronic disease, you may find yourself facing increased levels of stress. There are ways to manage the stresses of everyday life. Make sure you talk to your healthcare provider for tips about stress management. Write down your questions and get answers to them.

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