

Stress and Chronic Illness

Definitions:

Stress: A stimulus whether it be internal or external exerting a mental or physical response that can be both exciting and distressing.

Chronic Illness: An illness lasting a long time or recurring often, continuing indefinitely; perpetual or constant.

Individuals diagnosed with a chronic illness experience stress on a daily basis. Stress may cause physical and emotional changes in the body. This may cause a worsening of symptoms, change response to treatments or cause additional health problems. On the reverse side, stress and conflict, may also be positive forces. Challenges may bring about personal growth. Without stress and conflict, life can be boring. Since stress cannot be completely eliminated, it is important to learn coping skills to deal with it.

While the sources of individual stress can vary from person to person, some common sources experienced by a person diagnosed with a chronic illness may be:

Emotions: These include anger, frustration, depression, or anxiety. These feelings can be the result of the changes brought about by a chronic illness. These changes may include a reduced ability to work or function as before, or a worsening of the illness. Significant changes in lifestyle can lower self esteem and cause a decrease in social interaction with family and friends.

Finances: Changes in employment may be caused by a decreased ability to perform at a present job. This may result in reduced income and changes in insurance coverage. This strain can be felt by the other family members as well.

Here are a few constructive steps that can be taken to minimize stress:

1. Realize that it's okay to sometimes feel frustrated, frightened, angry or depressed.
 - Accepting an illness doesn't mean you must like it. Denying the illness won't make it go away. Acceptance only means realizing that the body has some limitations for which you may have to make accommodations.
 - Concentrate on abilities or accomplishments instead of what you cannot do.
 - Avoid self pity. It builds stress, zaps energy and doesn't help. in your overall wellbeing.
2. Maintain realistic goals:
 - Take charge of your life. A positive attitude is extremely important. This is within control of every individual.
 - Realize the limitations caused by illness, including the need for rest and exercise.
 - Good nutrition is important.

- Chronic illness affects each individual differently. Education about the illness, medications and therapy is important. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Many fears and anxieties can be reduced by learning more about the illness.
- Look into stress management classes or go to the local library for books or tapes on relaxation techniques. Meditation, yoga, visualization, message therapy and prayer may be helpful.

3. Learn to express emotions constructively.

- Communication can aid mutual understanding and support.
- Avoid isolation. Support groups may be helpful as well as activities sponsored by organizations associated with the illness.
- Maintain contacts with friends and family.
- Make the most of personal appearance and good grooming.
- Develop hobbies and personal interests.
- Seek professional counseling if self concerns or family problems threaten to overwhelm you.
- Most of all learn to live each and every day to **your** fullest.