

Adjusting to Life with a Chronic Illness: **3 Things to Do After Diagnosis**



Preparing for what may come after being diagnosed with a chronic illness can help individuals adjust to their new lives.

By Brenda Kimble

SHOCK. DESPAIR. Worry. That's what people often feel after being diagnosed with a chronic illness. But there's hope, too, and relief. Why? Because now you know what is wrong. And, even though it might take time to realize it, there's power in knowing what it is that's been plaguing your body for such a long time. All those symptoms? All those doctor visits? All those blood tests? Now, they amount to something: a diagnosis.

Living with a chronic illness is hard, and sometimes it can feel downright impossible. But in this fight, you're certainly

not alone. By 2020, an estimated 157 million people in the United States will be living with a chronic illness. The key word, of course, is "living." Making it through days, weeks, months and — yes! — years is more difficult when you're doing it while sick. But whether your illness is visible or invisible, whether it affects you daily or flares up every so often, whether you're in remission or fighting for it, living while chronically ill is something you *can* do. You just need to make a few adjustments. Following are three things to do now that you've been diagnosed.

Build a Support System

Even the most independent people can't go it alone all the time. You know the phrase "it takes a village"? Well, that doesn't only apply to children. It makes perfect sense for you, too, and every other adult out there. We all need help from time to time, especially when we're ill.

With a chronic illness, there are times of sickness ahead. If your symptoms are well-managed now, it can be tempting to push aside this necessary step to living with a chronic illness. I urge you not to wait. Get a support system in place now, whether you're feeling healthy or not.

Who should be members of your support system?

- Doctors, including specialists and a general practitioner
- A mental health counselor, since the incidence of depression and anxiety increases in those with chronic illnesses
- Friends and family whom you feel comfortable asking for help such as cooking meals, running errands, cleaning the house and providing moral support

You might also want to enlist the help of a physical therapist, a nutritionist, a financial planner, a patient advocate or a social worker.

Manage Stress

The impact of stress on the immune system is well-documented. Numerous studies show stress puts strain on organs and body systems, increases inflammation in the body, triggers symptomatic flares and worsens mental health.

From impacting digestion to raising blood pressure, there are a variety of ways stress damages the body. Each of these effects prevents the immune system from defending the body against foreign invaders and healing the damage caused by normal wear and tear. Minimizing stress is essential to maintaining health.

But how do you minimize stress when you've just received your diagnosis? How you do it is up to you. There are lots of techniques to help you manage your stress level. A bit of good news: Research is beginning to show these destressing strategies also improve other areas of mental and physical health.

You can try a variety of different things such as breathing exercises, yoga, an exercise regimen, meditation, mindfulness practices and therapy. Spending time outside and participating in physical activity and creative outlets have all been shown to reduce stress levels in both the general population and in the chronically ill.

To reap the benefits, begin exploring your options now. Put a routine in place, and make note of it. Share it with others so that if you forget about it, they can gently remind you it's time to take it up. That way, when you're beginning to feel stressed or depressed, you can turn to your chosen practice and begin to breathe a little easier once again.

Plan for the Future

There are hundreds of different chronic illnesses and many subtypes with different projected outcomes, so what your future looks like will be different from what another's future will look like.

To figure out what your future could hold, first sit down with your medical team or the specialist you work with to manage and treat your chronic illness. It might be wise to have your significant other at this meeting so you can discuss the possibilities together.

Then, sit down with the decisionmakers in your family. That could be a spouse, a child, a parent or even a close friend. You need to have an honest conversation — or a series of conversations — about your wishes for the future, along with contingency plans in case your health deteriorates.

Here's a short list of topics you should consider now before they become an issue down the road:

- Fertility and reproduction
- Childcare
- A living will
- Long-term care and caregiving responsibilities
- Power of attorney
- Property and estate management
- Retirement savings and financial investments
- Senior care plans for your parents and your significant other's parents

A Next Step

Adjusting to life with a chronic illness is all about ensuring that if you get sick — or sicker than you are right now — you always have a next step in place. That way, once life happens, you can move forward without worrying about what you need to take care of first. Tackle it bit by bit, and you'll find yourself ready for whatever lies ahead. ■

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