

Self-Management of Chronic Illness

There are 2 main types of illness: acute and chronic. An acute illness doesn't last very long. It goes away on its own or in response to treatment, such as taking medicine or having surgery. Strep throat is an example of an acute illness.

A chronic illness is ongoing. It affects your health over a long period of time—possibly your entire life. In many cases, there is no way to cure a chronic illness. Diabetes and high blood pressure are examples of chronic illnesses.

Living with this type of long-term illness can throw your life out of order. It can interfere with your plans and how you see yourself. It can make you angry or even depressed. You may feel alone. One of the best ways to cope with a chronic illness is to take part in managing it. This can help you feel like you are regaining control of your life.

Path to improved health

It's important to take your chronic illness seriously. If you don't believe this, you'll never be motivated to manage your illness effectively. Managing your illness involves making good lifestyle choices and using prescribed medical treatments to be as healthy as possible. If you don't take care of your body, your chronic illness can cause more problems in the future.

When you have a chronic health problem, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. You may even feel helpless, as if the illness has taken over your life. For example, you may need to take daily insulin injections. You may need to use an inhaler or monitor your blood pressure. However, you can take steps to control the negative effects of a chronic illness on your health. One method of taking control is called "self-management."

What is self-management of chronic illness?

Self-management of chronic illness means that doing what it takes to manage your illness effectively. It's important for you to be responsible for your health. The treatment recommendations your doctor makes won't do any good unless you follow them. They can't make decisions for you or make you change your behavior. Only you can do these things.

In self-management, you and your doctor are partners in your care. Your doctor can provide valuable advice and information to help you manage your illness. However, the treatment plan that works best for one person with your condition might not work best for you. Talk to your doctor about the different treatment options available. Help create a plan that's right for you. After all, nobody knows more than you do about your feelings, your actions, and how your health problems affect you.

As part of self-management, it's also your responsibility to ask for the help you need to manage your illness. This support can come from friends and family members. It may come from your doctor or a support group for people with your health problem.

How can self-management help a person who has a chronic illness?

Once you've decided to take an active role in managing your illness, you and your doctor can work together to set goals that will lead to better health. These goals will be part of an overall treatment plan.

Pick a problem

Take an honest look at the unhealthy aspects of your lifestyle. Start with a particular behavior that you'd like to change. For example, you might decide that you don't eat enough vegetables, get enough exercise, or take your medicines as recommended.

Get specific

Once you've identified a problem, state a specific goal for managing it. The more specific your goal, the more likely you are to succeed. For example, instead of saying, "I'm going to exercise more," decide what kind of exercise you'll do. Be specific about what days of the week you'll exercise and what times you'll exercise on those days. Your new goal might be: "During my lunch hour on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I'm going to walk 1 mile in the park."

Plan ahead

After you've stated your goal, think of things that could go wrong and plan how you'll overcome them. For example, if it rains and you can't go to the park, where will you go to walk? If you plan how to handle problems in advance, they won't prevent you from meeting your goals.

Check your confidence level

Ask yourself, "How confident am I that I'll be able to meet this goal?" If the answer is "Not very confident," you may need to start with a more realistic goal.

Follow up

As you're working toward your goal, check in regularly with your doctor to let them know how you're doing. If you're having trouble following the plan, talk to your doctor to figure out why. Your setbacks can be learning experiences that help you make a new plan for success.

Things to consider

One of the most important things to remember is that you can change your behavior. Even though your illness makes you feel helpless at times, you are not. If you work with your doctor to

set goals and you take responsibility for following through with them, you can make changes that will lead to better health.

Questions for your doctor

- What are my treatment options?
- What is the goal of my treatment?
- What complications could develop from my illness?
- How often should I see my doctor to monitor my chronic illness?
- Should I also see a specialist for my chronic illness?
- Can you recommend a support group?
- What books or websites should I read to learn more about my chronic illness?

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This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject.