



Support Group Leader Training – Section 3-Lesson 4

Subject: How to Cope When Chronic Pain Causes Anxiety

If you've been diagnosed with a chronic illness, you may feel as if you have no control over your future. The stress of learning to navigate the medical world, cope with physical changes, and manage daily life can often lead to excessive worry or panic. Researchers have found that experiencing a chronic illness puts a person at increased risk for developing anxiety or an anxiety disorder.

Roughly 40% of people with cancer report experiencing psychological distress that often takes the shape of excessive worry or panic attacks.¹ People with chronic pain are three times more likely to develop symptoms of anxiety.

Even long after a diagnosis, the daily demands of living with a chronic illness can continue to present challenges and generate anxiety. Loss of mobility or other abilities can lead to worry about safety, employment, or financial independence. Depending on others or engaging in sexual intimacy may also be concerns. Some are more easily able to adapt to the changes in their lives. Others may feel overwhelmed with anxiety and struggle to cope.

Fortunately, anxiety is treatable with therapy, medication and complementary and alternative treatments (i.e. acupuncture). But when the focus is on the chronic illness, anxiety is often overlooked. That's why it's important to talk to your doctor about your emotional *and* cognitive health, and to speak up when you experience signs of anxiety.

Signs of Anxiety in Patients with Chronic Illness³

- Excessively worrying about physical health
- Trouble sleeping due to worry
- Having nightmares about physical health
- Experiencing panic attacks about prognosis
- Difficulty discussing physical condition
- Avoiding treatments that cause anxiety
- Avoiding social interactions
- Having intrusive thoughts about dying
- Becoming irritable about physical health

What You Can Do

Challenge negative thinking. When you're anxious, your brain may jump to conclusions, assume the worst, or exaggerate. Catastrophizing and ignoring the positives in your life may occur when you live with the challenges of a chronic illness. One way to manage anxiety is by being aware of the negative thinking, examining it and challenge the irrational thoughts. Counsellors/therapists can play an important role in teaching you this important coping skill.

Calm your mind. Relaxation techniques can be an effective way to calm anxious thinking and direct your mind to a more positive place. Consider whether mindfulness meditation, yoga, or other breathing and focusing practices can still your body. Taking time to relax, increases your ability to think objectively and positively when it comes to making choices about your health and life.

Find a good prescriber. If you take medication for both mental and for physical health, it's important to that your doctors are aware of all your medications. Some medications may actually escalate anxiety, so it's essential to work with a prescriber who can make informed choices that address both conditions without worsening either.

Find a support group. Managing a chronic illness can be a lonely job as it may be difficult for loved ones to understand the unique challenges. Support groups are wonderful for creating community but also for providing information that can help reduce worry. They can also connect you to valuable resources for treating your illness. Check with your local hospital or community center to find a local group. You can also search the Internet for online support.

Recruit the right team. Patients benefit the most when chronic illness and psychological distress, such as anxiety, are treated with a team of people who communicate regularly. Doctors, pain specialists, psychiatrists, counsellors, occupational therapists, and physical therapists are among those who can help you create and implement a treatment plan for your physical and mental health.

Acknowledge successes. Anxious thinking about chronic illness can keep you from feeling that you have control over anything in life. It's important to acknowledge all successes, both big and small. Keep track of the healthy things you do for your mind and body. Exercising, going to counselling, spending time with a friend—these can all help. Keeping these successes at the front of your mind can help you combat worry. They can remind you that you do have the power to affect your present and future.

If you think that you might have anxiety in addition to chronic illness, be honest with your doctor. Ask for help. Anxiety is highly treatable, so never lose hope.

Please complete the Knowledge Test – How to Cope When Chronic Pain Causes Anxiety - Section 3 Quiz 4 - before moving to the next training file

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