

Coping With Chronic Pain and Illness

The psychological impact of chronic pain such as fibromyalgia, RSD/CRPS, chronic back pain, sciatica, etc. and the impact on coping can be serious, but this does not preclude effective coping and even the possibility of happiness. Chronic pain is often associated with depression and anxiety. This can include not enjoying the usual pleasures of life, crying spells, a lack of drive or a-motivation, decreased ability to cope with even minor stressors and frustrations, irritability, a diminished sexual drive, social withdrawal from others, and a loss of self-esteem. Intrusive rumination or tendency to worry and think about sad or distressing things or problems without resolution can become problematic. In addition, with the development of a chronic health problem, one can become increasingly preoccupied with health concerns and pay too much attention to some minor complaint that previously would have been ignored, but now may be seen as indicating something potentially serious.

Cognitive issues, or “fibro fog” can also be an issue, especially with fibromyalgia. This includes problems with concentration, memory, organization, cognitive discontinuity or losing one’s train of thought, diminished comprehension, including reading comprehension, and effective cognitive processing. With RSD/CRPS and other chronic pain disorders, anxiety, diminished concentration, and distractibility can be problematic.

Given these issues and the often adverse impact on family functioning, effective coping, as well as happiness, has to start with self-acceptance. This means accepting yourself as you are, which includes chronic pain. Accepting yourself also requires accurate self-appraisal and recognizing not just your weaknesses, but more importantly, your strengths. Accepting a chronic condition or illness does not mean giving into it; rather it means accepting that it is a part of your life, although not the defining feature of your life or identity. Accepting a chronic condition means learning how to manage it as effectively as you can and working with it, not against it. Railing against the darkness does not get the lights turned on; turning on the lights requires first accepting that it is dark and one needs the illumination. Similarly, accepting the reality of a chronic condition means learning and becoming educated about it, seeking out competent health care providers and seeing them as consultants, not as hand-holders, and assuming responsibility for yourself and for your care and being accountable to yourself and family. That is, it is

certainly valid to have a ‘bad day’ and not be able to accomplish all you would like; it is not valid or acceptable to assume that the other people in the family can read your mind about your needs, or to be irritable, or to feel sorry for yourself. Taking out frustration or unhappiness on other people is not acceptable; nor is self-pity. Further, in terms of happiness, no one is responsible for an individual’s happiness, either; it is an inside job. Thus, the importance of self-acceptance.

Concomitantly, expectations for self and others need to be realistic and attainable. Perfection is neither. Thus, images and expectations of perfection are not conducive to either effective coping or to happiness. No matter how much you are loved by others or how well a person explains what chronic pain feels like, no one else can crawl inside and really know how you feel. Keep expectations of others modest in this regard as well. Also, after a time, families and friends regardless of how well-meaning will develop ‘compassion fatigue’: they no longer know what to do or what to say and simply get tired of dealing with it and tired of feeling helpless to remediate the condition in any appreciable form. Further, no one is here to live up to someone else’s expectations. One can only deal with ‘what is’, not with ‘what should be’.

Having chronic pain, fibromyalgia, RSD/CRPS, or other chronic health condition does not make you a victim. ‘Why me?’ could just as easily be ‘why not me?’ It is important to remember that everyone has something with which to contend and to overcome. Chronic pain and other chronic health conditions do tend to be limiting to some extent, and adversely impact on what previously could be done. However, it is a mistake to focus on what you can no longer do and those activities you can no longer enjoy because doing so precludes appreciating all the things and activities in which you can still engage and enjoy. There is often a tendency to minimize or take for granted what you have and can still do, such as enjoy a sunset, be interested in the lives of friends and family and to appreciate having a home, and someone who cares. This realization is requisite for effective coping and gratitude is required for happiness. A tendency to focus on the negative is only guaranteed to bring misery. This is based on inaccurate thinking and inaccurate thinking cannot enable effective coping and certainly is inconsistent with happiness. By the way, people who style themselves as “realists” typically are not: they are negative thinkers. In actuality, realists are those who think accurately: they do not ignore the negatives or problems since these have to be addressed; however, they also balance these with

the positives and neutrals since these need to be considered as well for an overall “realistic” perspective.

It is important to remember also that it has been demonstrated conclusively that one’s happiness is not correlated with the circumstances of a person’s life or the state of a person’s health. Pain does not preclude happiness. Life is full of tragedies and loss and happiness or unhappiness is not predicated or determined by one’s personal tragedies or losses, but how a person chooses to deal with them. Happiness and effective coping require effort; unhappiness and misery and depression require none. Humor is a requisite, as is learning how to manage your emotions and learning self-control. Doing good and having meaning and purpose in life is necessary as well. This does not require being Mother Teresa; it only requires seeing the good in others and being kind, such as a smile and thanks to a clerk in the grocery store. Chronic pain or chronic illness does not preclude any of the above. Learning not only to cope effectively with chronic pain or illness, but choosing to be happy when one does not feel well is difficult, but attainable. It takes determination of purpose, a willingness to be flexible in thought, and the desire to learn new thinking skills. The rewards are a better quality of life, a brighter future for yourself and loved ones, and the return of happiness.