

Faced with yet another health issue? - 5 areas for coping - 10/06/2014.

Whether you have been living with illness for many years or are finding ways to cope with a recent diagnosis, one of the most challenging things that can happen to someone with a long term condition is a new symptom and/or another illness. The resulting anxiety alone can tip you off balance and create more issues - disrupting sleep and intensifying pain. Here are some ways to deal healthily with this distressing situation.

### 1) Acknowledge how you feel emotionally - talk it out

You will naturally feel fear, anxiety, frustration, disappointment, even anger. Letting these build up won't help, and can result in worsening of your symptoms and reduced likelihood of you being able to look after yourself as your mood drops. You can address this by: writing down how you feel, talking to someone close who understands or even seeing a counsellor. Facing these feelings is essential so you can make positive choices. Telling someone you trust and having the opportunity to talk over your options is vital to help release some of the fear and focus on what you can do. When you have been ill for a long time you can become very good at living with high levels of pain and other disruptive symptoms, and so may not seek help as readily as someone who usually feels well. Be careful not to put everything down to your existing diagnosis, listen to your body. Talking things through with someone who knows you well can help you reach a more rational decision about the most appropriate next step.

### 2) Seek help - involve others

Ask others to help out while you are dealing with this - whether emotionally or practically - anything that helps you to adjust and take good care of yourself is valuable. Remember anyone who has ever offered to help you as well as those who you have helped - it is your turn. Support systems that have fallen away after you adapted to your original problem may need revisiting to help you through: support groups, online forums, people with similar health problems, health services, a specific therapist, particularly empathic friends: whoever you find supportive, seek them out. This can be a great way to remind yourself of the strategies you find the most helpful. Seek medical advice - if you see a doctor and the outcome is that you were worrying unnecessarily, you'll be relieved. If there is cause for concern, you can move to the next step. Not doing anything just prolongs anxiety and may delay resolution or adjustment.

### 3) Revisit what helps - maintain healthy behaviours

What really helps you cope with your health problems? Whether it's more rest, quiet, pacing, meditation, seeing friends - make sure you are doing plenty of it during this difficult time. Putting yourself back into the centre of decisions and choices - if this has slipped - can be very helpful at this point. Review your usual coping and self-care strategies and ask yourself if any of them have reduced due to this new problem? Good nutrition, sleep hygiene, gentle exercise and open communication with loved ones easily get affected when we are struggling physically and this can negatively impact on coping. Enlist the help of a partner or friend to consider what works best for you and support you to keep it in focus.

#### 4) Slow down - pamper yourself

Trying to carry on 'as normal' while you are in a health crisis can be due to denying its reality, or down to feelings of guilt or responsibility. Ask yourself whether there is anything you can temporarily pull back on while you address the issue, whether with work, caring or socially. Taking each day as it comes is helpful: see it as a necessary but temporary change in circumstance until you know different. Part of acknowledging a tough time is being kind to yourself and one way to do this is to increase the amount of enjoyable things you are doing. This can be small things such as watching comedy box sets or a favourite food to bigger things such as cancelling a non-essential event and having a day of complete rest.

#### 5) Recall previous health challenges - remember your strength

This may seem like a negative thing to do, but when we are in a new crisis we often lose sight of how well we have coped with past difficulty. Remembering what we have already overcome can take us back to recognising our strengths and realising that we can cope with a lot. If you have a chronic health problem you already have a wealth of experience of coping, adjusting to restriction, facing challenges and dealing with strong emotion. Once you have this knowledge you don't lose it, it just sometimes gets hidden under a temporary cloud. Even if the worst does happen, you are well equipped to cope.