

Live Well, Work Well

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The Connection Between Mental Health and Chronic Illness



Living with a chronic illness can be draining, both physically and mentally. As such, people who live with a chronic illness are at a higher risk of developing a mental health condition. Likewise, mental health symptoms can cause a flare-up or worsen if you have a chronic health condition.

This article explores the connection between mental health and chronic illness and provides self-care tips.

Co-occurring Conditions

Both mind and body are affected by physical and emotional changes as well as social aspects (e.g., income, housing and employment). These factors can increase the likelihood of someone with a chronic illness developing a coexisting condition, such as a mental health condition. In addition, people living with chronic conditions often experience emotional stress and chronic pain. Physical changes in the body and medications could also exacerbate physical and mental issues.

Depression is one example of the prevalence of co-occurring conditions. Research shows that the risk for depression is higher among those suffering from chronic illness. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the following amount of chronic illness patients also have depression:

- Parkinson's disease: 51%
- Cancer: 42%
- Diabetes: 27%
- Cerebrovascular disease: 23%
- Cardiovascular disease: 17%

These statistics validate that living with a chronic illness is often challenging for both the body and the mind. Treatment for coexisting conditions is crucial to managing such conditions fully.

Taking Care of Yourself

Managing multiple chronic conditions requires self-care, and mental health conditions can make caring for oneself difficult. Consider the following physical and mental self-care tips:

- **Stay connected to health care professionals.** You should be able to talk openly with your doctor about your ongoing questions and concerns to help you feel more settled.
- **Surround yourself with support.** Living with a chronic illness may feel lonely, but it's essential to surround yourself with personal and professional support. Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it. Some may find support groups and counseling helpful.
- **Get enough sleep.** Quality sleep is essential for physical and mental well-being. Although it may be hard to sleep at times, try to maintain your usual sleeping pattern.
- **Eat healthy, balanced meals.** Eating healthy is vital for your overall physical and mental health. Furthermore, certain chronic diseases may require a specialized diet, so follow nutrition guidance from a health care professional.
- **Stay active.** Your health care professional can guide and recommend the best way to stay active and get daily movement. Physical activity can also give your mind a rest.
- **Take time to unwind.** It's essential to still engage in activities you enjoy. It may also be helpful to explore stress-relief activities like meditation.

If you live with a chronic health condition, you likely spend a lot of time and energy managing the physical impact of your illness. However, a little self-care can go a long way. Be extra kind to yourself, especially during flares.

Summary

Living with a chronic health condition can take a toll on your body and affect one's ability to cope with psychological and emotional stress. If you live with a chronic illness and have experienced symptoms of a mental health condition, you're not alone. It's not uncommon to experience feelings such as fear, sadness or anger, especially right after a diagnosis or during a flare-up. Mental health recovery takes time, but treatment can improve one's quality of life and allow the focus to shift to chronic health condition management.

If you're concerned about your mental health, talk to your doctor, a licensed mental health professional or contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline by calling 800-662-HELP (4357).

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