

# Coping with chronic illness and anxiety

It's natural to feel worried or scared after being diagnosed and having to deal with a chronic medical illness. These include conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma, multiple sclerosis, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic pain and cancer.

Anxiety is more common in people who have been diagnosed with a severe or chronic medical illness than in those who have not.

Anxiety can coexist with a severe or chronic medical illness for various reasons such as:

- A physical connection between the medical illness and anxiety
- Side effects of medication(s) taken for severe or chronic medical illness
- The adjustment process of accepting and dealing with medical illness

These factors can cause you to be uncertain about the future of your health, nervous about managing your illness, or concerned about how your illness may impact your relationships with family and others. Understanding and learning more about your chronic medical illness can usually help ease your worries, although it's normal to experience persistent worry and fear prior to starting treatment.

## Benefits of treatment for anxiety

It's important to know that feeling anxious for prolonged periods of time is not normal for

people who are dealing with a severe or chronic medical illness. Anxiety, regardless of the reason it developed, can be treated effectively. Treatment for anxiety can improve your ability to manage your severe or chronic medical illness.

## Getting started with treatment

Remember that you can get help from a health care professional if you've been feeling worried, scared, angry or frustrated while dealing with a chronic medical illness. Ask your doctor for a complete evaluation to determine the cause of continuing anxious feelings. It's also a good idea to consider working with a behavioral health care professional to address your concerns. When talking with any health care professional, be prepared to discuss:

- How long you have been experiencing worry or fear
- All of your emotional symptoms including mood changes, irritability, anger, feelings of losing control, etc.
- All of your physical symptoms— aches and pains, digestive problems, appetite changes, etc.



- Other recent changes in your life, in addition to your diagnosis, whether they are good or bad changes—job change, marriage, new baby, death in family, divorce, etc.
- All medications and substances you use including prescription medications, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, supplements, caffeine and alcohol
- Your family’s health history.

### Potential action steps

Interventions to address anxiety and chronic medical illnesses can include:

- Changing your medication
- Joining a support group
- Participating in psychotherapy
- Developing a healthier lifestyle.

Through the support of health care professionals and other people who are dealing with chronic illnesses similar to yours, you can learn to better manage anxious feelings.

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