

CONNECTING

Healthy Information from the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center  November/December 2008

Chronic Illness: Beyond the Physical Symptoms

When individuals are initially diagnosed with a chronic physical illness (like cancer, arthritis, diabetes, or heart disease), the first focus is on treatments aimed at reducing pain, stopping the spread of the disease, and making lifestyle changes that will help lessen the severity or improve the prognosis of the physical illness. These actions are essential; however, it is also crucial to remember that there are often psychological, emotional, and social changes involved as well.

Many people with physical health concerns also have overlapping mental health issues, especially anxiety and depression. For some, a physical diagnosis can exacerbate an underlying psychological concern; for others, mental health issues emerge as a result of the diagnosis while dealing with the physical health problem. Research has shown that individuals with chronic illness often reach diagnosable levels of clinical depression and anxiety, though many of those people do not seek the psychological treatment that could benefit them (Katz, Flasher, Cacciapaglia & Nelson, 2001).

When someone with a chronic illness notices changes in mood, appetite, sleeping habits, motivation, energy levels, and general life enjoyment, he or she may be experiencing some of the symptoms of anxiety or depression. There are several steps that can be taken to help: talking to a mental health professional, finding ways to exercise and be active in life, and seeking out friends to talk to.

Find a Trusted Counselor Finding a trusted counselor to talk to about the physical symptoms of a chronic illness as well as the psychological, emotional, and social ramifications is important for many people with a chronic illness. Gleaning support from a counselor throughout the potentially traumatic phases of treatment and through the emotional highs and lows of the process can be crucial for many people. Individuals with physical issues should be prepared to help educate their counselors and/or to recommend resources for better understanding their disease situation. Reaching out to a trained counselor may be difficult at first, but talking to an objective, outside observer can provide some stability and support that close friends and family are often unable to provide.

Stay Active The physical disempowerment that comes with many chronic illnesses may make people feel helpless and can lead to a spiral of depression and anxiety.

Each individual's experience of a particular disorder is unique, and finding ways to cope is a personal process. Some individuals find that staying active through exercise, involvement in a career or volunteer activities, and engagement in hobbies helps provide fulfillment that might ordinarily be lost with changes in physical functioning.

Gather Social Support Social support is one of the key factors associated with lowered levels of depression and increased well being in individuals with chronic illness (Fyrand et al., 2002). Social support can serve as a buffer that prevents people from sinking further into depression or anxiety. Some individuals are able to find support from other people with similar diagnoses. If it is helpful to talk to other people with similar disorders, seek out a support group or consider finding an online community to join. It can also be beneficial to talk to family and caring friends who do not have the disorder. One's church or synagogue could be another source of social, emotional, and spiritual support.

However, physical limitations from the chronic illness can impair a person's ability to seek out friends and socialize. Asking for help from children or a spouse can be almost unthinkable for certain individuals. Learning to find a balance between seeking support and maintaining some autonomy is always a learning process; it can present a unique struggle for people with chronic illness.

Look for the Silver Lining A new area of research in the field of health psychology has focused on how people are able to find positive outcomes after a traumatic experience. Researchers have found that individuals who are able to find some silver lining in the dark cloud of coping with a new diagnosis often fare better than those who stay pessimistic (Tedeschi, 2001). Other research has shown that people who take steps to improve their psychological well being can actually do better physically. One study of people with arthritis showed that those who reported being less depressed had lower levels of pain and actually had less swelling of joints than their more depressed counterparts (Cohen, 1996). Individuals with chronic illness may find a variety of positive benefits of their illness, which may include closer relationships, the

...continued on page 2

ability to re-prioritize one's life, and/or enhanced spirituality. Even when the positives seem small, the act of thinking positively and looking for that silver lining has been proven to be beneficial.

Recognize Impact on Family When an individual is diagnosed with a chronic illness, his or her family is also affected. For some disorders, family members have an even stronger reaction to the diagnosis than the individual. Their concerns include an increased caretaking burden, financial difficulties, role transitions, and changes in the dynamics of how families relate to one another. In some cases, where there is a genetic threat for family members to also develop the same type of disorder, there may be added stress because of the personal threat of developing the disease. The dynamics of how family members generally relate to each other are thrown into upheaval when a chronic illness enters into the family. In these situations, seeking individual or family counseling can be especially important.

In summary Individuals with chronic illness are encouraged to be attuned to the psychological and emotional stressors that they experience as a result of their disorder. Seeking counseling, staying active, finding social support, and looking for the silver lining can help people cope with these life-changing crises. Recommendations for people with chronic illness:

- Seek counseling when you notice yourself becoming depressed or anxious.
- Find social support from other people with chronic illnesses or from friends and family who can offer the empathy that you need.
- Look for ways to stay positive.
- Recognize that your illness may affect your friends and family members in profound ways.
- Don't underestimate the connections between your stress, emotions, and psychological well being and how you feel physically.
- Stay educated about your disorder and seek out the resources you need.

Nicole E. Taylor, Ph.D.

Nicole Taylor received her Ph.D. in counseling psychology from the University of Maryland, College Park. Her research has focused on the psychosocial effects of autoimmune diseases, how families cope with the threat of genetic diseases, positive consequences of chronic illness, and how psychotherapy can be helpful for people with autoimmune diseases. Her clinical specialties are focused on chronic physical illness, college student adjustment, suicidal ideation, and gender and sexual orientation issues.

Nicole is an assistant professor of psychology at Drake University, and also sees clients at the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center on a part-time basis.

COOL Corner

Children Overcoming the Obstacles of Life

How Families Adapt When There Is a Child with Chronic Illness

Chronic illness poses an interruption in family life. The extra care and treatment needs strain the family's ability to function in the ways they did before the illness. Most families attempt to contain the intrusion into their lives and to preserve as much normalcy as possible while attempting to assimilate the very different family experience.

- * Families attempt to embed any special care or required treatments into the family's system of routines.
- * Parents learn to manage the amount and type of information that is disseminated within the family.
- * Families build relationships with other families dealing with similar diagnoses.
- * Families begin to grapple with as well as to challenge the definition of "normal."
- * Families readjust their priorities in a variety of areas.
- * Families adjust their expectations of each other and the roles of each member.
- * Families rethink their future goals.
- * Families rebuild their dreams.



References and Recommended Readings:

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- Fyrand, L., Moum, T., Finset, A., & Glennas, A. (2002). The impact of disability and disease duration on social support of women with rheumatoid arthritis. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 25(3), 251-268.
- Katz, R. C., Flasher, L., Cacciapaglia, H., & Nelson, S. (2001). The psychosocial impact of cancer and lupus: A cross-validation study that extends the generality of "benefit-finding" in patients with chronic disease. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 24(6), 561-571.
- O'Leary, A. (1990). Stress, emotion, & human immune function. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 363-382.
- Taylor, S. E. (1983). Adjustment to threatening events. *American Psychologist*, 1161-1173.
- Tedeschi, R. G. and Calhoun, L. G. (1995). *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Happy Holidays?

How can such a joyful time of the year cause people depression and anxiety?

The holiday season can mean a variety of things to people. It can be associated with delightful family traditions or unpleasant memories of the past. It can also be a reminder of the loss of a loved one. Many times expectations for a wonderful season are set too high and hopes are left unfulfilled and a sense of grief and loss related to dashed hopes can set in.

How can you recognize holiday depression in a friend or family member?

Look for withdrawal, social isolation, sadness, lifelessness, overeating, and excessive drinking or sleeping.

Is time-management the answer to the holiday chaos people experience?

No, realistic expectations are the answer. It is important to keep expectations and desires realistic in terms of what you hope for relationally and what you want to be able to do financially.

What can people do to limit their expectations, and consequent disappointments, of the holiday season?

Individuals can resist the tendency to compare themselves to others. Try exchanging gifts of “love” that come from the heart or from the work of your own hands, rather than “things” with little emotional value behind them. Look for alternative ways of celebrating the holidays that don’t overwhelm the spirit or the pocket book. Limit excessive travel and cramped schedules trying to please everyone. Recognize the possibility that different family traditions will conflict with one another and be willing to be flexible.

How can you teach your children to focus on giving, rather than receiving, during the holidays?

Parents could try to model the emphasis in their own giving – to their friends, family, and community. Think about giving more experiences - like a membership at the science or art museums, tickets to an event or theater - that will create shared time and fond memories. Consider holding a family conference to decide on a charity to support. Focus on the giving of “actions” rather than “items,” but be prepared to tolerate your child(ren)’s initial disappointment when they don’t receive the usual toys. Building new traditions takes time and commitment.

*Source: J. Jeffrey Means, Ph.D.
Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center*

Integrating Spirituality and Psychotherapy

- Dates:** January 9, 2009 – March 13, 2009
Time: Fridays, 8:15 – 9:45 a.m.
Location: Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center
Fee: \$200.00
Registration Deadline: December 19, 2008
Instructor: Peter Brantner, M.Div., M.S.

Integrating Spirituality and Psychotherapy is a ten-week introductory course exploring the integration of spirituality and psychotherapy when counseling clients who identify faith and/or spirituality as important components of their self-identity. Objectives for the course include:

- examining barriers and bridges between faith/spirituality and psychotherapy
- assisting the counselor in examining his/her own spiritual identity and building awareness of transference/countertransference issues in client work
- providing exposure to models of spiritual development and to assessment instruments and their use in therapy
- creating awareness of ethical issues and appropriate boundary setting with clients.



Peter Brantner, M.Div., M.S., is a pastoral counselor. Pete has a B.S. degree from Iowa State University, a Master of Divinity degree from St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, MO (a United Methodist seminary), and a Master of Science degree in Community Counseling from Drake University. He is ordained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and has completed the program in pastoral counseling and psychotherapy at the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center. Pete works with individuals and couples. He has a special interest in working with adults who have experienced trauma in their lives. Pete sees clients in both Des Moines and Lenox, IA.

WOMEN HELPING WOMEN Luncheon

**Save this date:
FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2009**

Guest Speaker will be the young award-winning Iowa author, Kali VanBaale, *The Space Between*

IRA Charitable Rollover Extended

In 2008 and 2009, individuals 70½ or older can once again donate up to \$100,000 from their IRAs **tax free** to a charitable organization. This allows you to **rollover** your minimum distribution to a charitable organization without having to count it as income for taxing purposes. Also, if at 70½ you have IRA funds that you know you will not need in retirement, the rollover presents an excellent opportunity to be generous while forgoing the taxes on an IRA distribution. Check with your tax advisor and then consider rolling over a charitable gift from your IRA to the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center by December 31, 2008.

Campaign for Hope and Healing

Just over \$2 million has been raised toward our \$3.6 million Campaign goal. We hope to break ground this spring!

Year-end Giving

The holidays can be difficult emotionally for many people. Issues of depression, anxiety, grief, anger, marital or family conflict, and parenting concerns are often magnified during the holidays. The current downturn in the economy will make this holiday season and the usual emotional issues especially tough on folks who have very few resources at hand. **We are able to offer our counseling on an ability-to-pay basis thanks to contributions from individuals like you. Please consider a year-end contribution of cash, stock, or IRA rollover to help us serve clients who are unable to afford the full cost of counseling.** Call Kathleen Murrin at (515) 274-4006 or send your tax-deductible contribution to DMPCC, 2929 Westown Pkwy., Ste. 110, West Des Moines 50266.

Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation

Leaving a legacy is more than passing funds to the next generation. Leaving your legacy is also about an opportunity to send a message that reflects your values and continues your commitments. We encourage you to consider a bequest or planned gift to the Des Moines Pastoral Counseling Center Foundation. Contact Kathleen Murrin at the Center for further information.

www.dmpcc.org

Visit the Center's website for more information on the Center's counseling services and staff, special events and classes.

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