Chronic Illness and Depression

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When Chronic Illness Leads to Depression and Anger

Your chronic illness weighs heavily on your body. Whether it is due to pain, mobility or your senses, your body doesn't function the way you want it to; it doesn't function the way other bodies do. This difference makes you stand out and forces others to see you differently.

The problems don't end with the physical, though. Your physical problems also weigh heavily on your mind. It seems to create a disconnect between you and the rest of the world because your experience is so different from other people's. You feel like an outsider in your own skin.

This weight increases the risk of experiencing mental health issues. Over the years, studies have found that people with physical disabilities are at greater risk of depression than the average population. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people with physical disabilities experience three times the rate of depression, three times the rate of loneliness and four times the rate of feeling like a failure.

These findings may be disappointing, but they do not indicate that you are destined to live a life full of depression and despair. Hopefully, this information gives you motivation to be different and exceptional.

Depression will try to suck you into its black hole. Your job is to resist and then fight back to make your life as positive and full of potential as it can be.

The task is intimidating but achievable. Here's how:

Work Through Anger

Whether the disability came into your life later or was there from birth, you are left with a lot of questions. Why did this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? How could God do this to me? Where did my life go wrong?

Think about these questions that come to your mind. What kind of feelings do they trigger? For most people, these questions create feelings of depression. The symptoms of sadness, low self-esteem, problems with weight changes and sleeping issues are recognizable, which makes them easier for professionals to treat.

For other people, the questions above trigger feelings of anger. What people do not understood so well is that anger commonly presents in people with physical disabilities. This is true because anger and depression are feelings that are closely related. When the feeling is turned inwardly, it is expressed as depression. When it is expressed outwardly towards others, it is anger.

Next page: More tips on working through anger.

Work Through Anger

To address anger directly, the first step is to acknowledge what you are feeling. Many people see anger as an undesirable feeling because of the negative association with violence and aggression. Actually, anger is a normal feeling to have. Trouble usually begins when people try to ignore, deny and suppress anger. These actions build stress and tension while diminishing your resources.

Begin checking in with your feelings daily or several times per day to track the level and intensity of your anger. You can document your experience in a journal or with homemade tracking sheets. If creating worksheets is not in your future, premade ones exist online.

Tracking your anger allows you to understand times and situations that bring about more anger. From there, you can choose to avoid the situations altogether or find some other way to modify the conditions. This will help with the people, places and things that make you angry, but you are still left to answer the questions from earlier.

It may seem questions like “Why did this happen?” and “What did I do to deserve this?” have no definitive answer. Because of this, it is up to you to create an answer that sounds believable and is grounded in rational thought.

For example, consider saying, “I didn’t do anything to deserve my physical disability. It is not punishment for something I did or did not do in the past. This is just the way I am and I accept me.” By believing this line of thinking, you lessen feelings or judgments that you are responsible. Less responsibility means less guilt and less shame.

If that example did not strike a chord with you, consider a more religiously involved one by saying, “God has a plan for everyone. This is the plan that He has for me. It is not my job to question or understand the will of God. I trust God’s plan.” This idea goes along with the view that “bad things happen to good people.” This response brings a sense of peace to the situation.

If anger still persists, don’t hide it. Show it.

- **Yell –** Yelling at people is usually not productive. People’s feelings get hurt and you say things that you do not mean. So, yell at the wall or into a pillow. Scream as loud or as long as you can. After you complete the yelling, think about what it is you really want to say to someone and more appropriate ways to communicate it.
- **Break –** Visit a local thrift store or yard sale to find unwanted dishes, records, vases or anything else that looks like fun to break. Store them in a dedicated place in your home and when you feel anger building, seek them out. Of course, safety is important. Think about wearing safety glasses and gloves. The sensation of breaking something can be quite rewarding.
- **Hit –** Determine what is hittable in your home. Balloons are great options as they are readily available and clean up easily. Many times, anger and depression come from feeling powerless or helpless. Hitting something can inspire a feeling of empowerment that you can use to achieve your goals.
- **Throw –**Throwing a ball against a wall or a chunk of clay against the top of a table provides relief by releasing energy and stimulating your senses of touch, sight and sound. Pick up that clay and throw it down harder next time.

Next page: finding purpose.

Find Purpose

Once depression and anger begin to alleviate, you can shift your focus towards finding purpose in life. Your depression combined with your disability may have had you thinking that your life was now meaningless. A life without meaning only produces more depression. Make your life worthwhile by being motivated to set goals. Setting and achieving goals gives your life purpose and direction while boosting your self-esteem and self-

determinism.

The best goals start with being SMART goals. This means that they are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely. You know that your disability will stand in the way of some accomplishments so setting an unrealistic goal will not be helpful. Instead, focus on SMART goals to build encouragement and momentum. If you are feeling stuck in a rut of self-doubt, seek out the opinions of trusted supports in your life to find goals.

Setting goals is a start. The rest takes action. Here's how to make goals into reality:

- **Document it.** Putting the information on paper creates tangibility. It will remind you of what you are working for and why you want to achieve it. Have visual reminders around the house to maintain focus.
- **Work backwards.** With goals, finding the place to start is tricky. You cannot proceed if you do not know where to begin. Break the goal down in smaller steps starting at the end and moving to the beginning. If you want to get outside everyday, the process would go: Prepare yourself for departure. Take appropriate steps to gain assistance. Run through modifications based on your disability. Acknowledge the benefits of fresh air. Go out the door.

- **See the prize.** Close your eyes and imagine what life will be like after you complete your goal. Think of the benefits and how depression will lessen.
- **Spread the word.** You do not need to act alone when it comes to goals. Having assistance with a goal does not diminish the act. You could do it by yourself, but it is easier (and more fun) to do it with others. Your friends and family will be happy to help.

- Victories on the road to your goal may seem small but any movement is a big accomplishment. Praise yourself and establish rewards along the way for movement. Patting yourself on the back will build momentum and you will be more likely to complete the next step.

Conclusion

Having a physical disability creates more stress, tension and frustration in your life. These aspects lead directly to more depression and anger. Working to acknowledge and reduce these feelings will free up more energies to pursue self-worth through goal setting. Goals give your life direction. They let you know that, no matter your situation, you are a fantastic person capable of amazing things.