

Coping with Chronic Illness Anger



Chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, autoimmune disorders, and multiple sclerosis can cause drastic changes in one's lifestyle. They can interfere with employment, interpersonal relationships, and individuals' independence. As a result, it is common for individuals navigating chronic illnesses to feel anger, frustration, and a sense of loss. While this reaction is certainly understandable, it may cause additional challenges at a time when one already feels overburdened. Below are some tips that can be helpful when you find yourself experiencing disruptive chronic illness-related anger:

- **Self-Validation:** First and foremost, nurture your ability to internally validate your emotions. It is essential to acknowledge that your feelings are important and justifiable. Self-validation is accepting your own internal experience, your thoughts, and your feelings. Self-validation doesn't mean that you believe all of your thoughts, but it does mean that you allow yourself to "feel the feels." Being present (also referred to as mindfulness or being in the here-and-now) is an integral component of self-validation. To be present means to ground yourself and not dissociate, daydream, suppress, or numb your emotions. In other words, being present means listening to yourself. The self-validation process may also involve allowing yourself room to grieve. We tend to associate grief specifically with the death of a loved one, but it can be experienced when facing any type of loss that significantly impacts our life, and anger is a natural part of the grieving process.
- **Understand Your Anger:** While at times anger is just anger, it can also be the outward expression of much more complex emotions. An analogy that is often used is anger as the tip of an iceberg floating above the surface of the water with myriad more complicated feelings lingering just below. (See attached handout). These other emotions—such as sadness, fear, or guilt—might cause a person to feel vulnerable, or they may not have the skills to manage them effectively, so the emotions are expressed as anger (a much less vulnerable emotion) instead. Reflecting on where you were when the anger began, who you were with, what you were doing, and how your body felt can give you additional clues. For instance, a reflection along the lines of, "I feel angry, and it started yesterday after my friend canceled lunch. I sense tightness in my stomach, so maybe there is fear as well." carries far more clarity than, "I'm mad because I'm a total loser, and no one wants to spend time with me." When you observe and describe your internal experience it helps you better understand and regulate your emotions, reactions, and personal needs.
- **Engage Support:** Talking with others who have experienced similar frustrations can help you release feelings of dissatisfaction and anger. Illness-specific online or in-person support groups are great places to vent, express concerns, and feel accepted and understood. It is also helpful to let the important people in your life know how you are feeling. They can motivate you, offer support, and help you manage angry reactions. Further, spending time with people you care about can alleviate stress and anger.

feelings. Lastly, consider engaging professional help. Individuals dealing with chronic illness are far more likely to experience depression. A mental health professional can provide guidance in better understanding your emotions and offer coping tools to help deescalate intrusive emotional experiences. It may be helpful to seek out a therapist who specializes in folks dealing with long-term health conditions.

- **Cultivate Positivity:** Set aside time on a daily basis to focus your attention and energy on the positive. Research demonstrates that intentionality around gratitude greatly impacts our overall well-being. Try creating a morning or evening ritual during which you list at least one thing you are grateful for. Keep in mind that daily gratitudes do not need to be grand. Maybe you're grateful for the blooming flower you caught a glimpse of or the dog you quickly pet in passing. The idea is to get your head and heart out of a negative space and generate positive energy. Some people enjoy using a journal or app to document their daily gratitudes. It can also be a great activity to engage in with your partner, child, best friend, or other important person in your life. It goes without saying that it is significantly more challenging to maintain a sense of anger when reflecting on aspects of your day that brought joy, encouragement, laughter, hope, motivation, etc.
- **Be Kind to Yourself:** Extending kindness and compassion to self is an important aspect of everyday wellness, but it is essential during times of heightened stress, physical challenges, or emotional strain. Self-care is an effective way to reduce experiences of negative emotions, including anger. However, it can easily become yet another overlooked item on our seemingly never-ending to-do list. Self-care does not need to be timely, expensive, or take a lot of planning. Even five minutes of self-care can be incredibly recharging. In terms of counterbalancing negative emotions, focus on self-care activities that are grounding, relaxing, and let you expel or express unwanted feelings. Some simple self-care ideas including going for a walk (or just stepping outside for some fresh air), deep breathing, meditation, yoga, engaging creatively (art, writing, music, etc.), calling or spending time with a friend, snuggling with a person or pet. It is also important to aim for self-care balance by incorporating activities from various spheres of life. Common self-care categories include physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and personal growth.

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