

Dealing with Illness

By Vivien Bergl, LCSW, CEAP, Solutions EAP Coordinator

What if you are suffering from a serious illness, or someone dear to you is, or a co-worker? How do you handle it? What do you do/not do?

Unfortunately people can sometimes be uncomfortable with serious illness and/or terminal illness. There isn't anyone that is not touched by this, however, and we all need support whether it is yourself going through it or someone near and dear to you.

We will be talking about how you can help yourself if you are dealing with a chronic illness. We will talk about how to deal with it at work and at home, some of the things that help and some that do not.

First, what is a chronic illness? It is an illness that creates persistent and recurring physical or mental health problems.

Living with illness affects every part of your life and every significant relationship you have. When you are first diagnosed, this is just the beginning. It takes time to understand your illness, the treatment options available, and how living with illness will affect your life and the lives of your loved ones. If you have an illness that is associated with a stigma, such as mental illness or AIDS, it creates even more of a challenge.



Often you need to make daily decisions and choices about every aspect of your life. If you are still able to work, you need to decide how much you tell your employer and co-workers, especially if your illness requires you to make time adjustments to your work schedule. Saying too much makes you vulnerable to unwanted questions, saying too little may raise questions of 'special treatment' and elicit criticism or even jealousy. When you make decisions about work or treatment options, not only does it affect you but co-workers and loved ones. This is a demanding aspect of living with a chronic illness. You have to deal with limitations and diminished control over your life. The fact is, if you're living with chronic illness you are courageous!

What are some ways to cope with the strain of coping with your diagnosis and the realities of treatment? The following are some ways to reduce or prevent the stress.

At Work:

- Delegate
- Keep the lines of communication open
- Get a massage

At Home

- Let people know what you need
- Cut yourself some slack
- Don't be afraid to say no
- Schedule lots of leisure time
- Listen to your body
- Be honest about your feelings

The good news is that the majority of people with chronic illness are leading fairly normal lives. Acceptance is a big piece of successfully living with illness.

What if it's a co-worker with a chronic illness? What should you do or not do?



First of all you need to examine your own feelings about illness and disability. Some people are judgmental and may think the person with the illness should be doing more. Perhaps you are fearful of having a chronic illness yourself and want to avoid the ill person. It is important to know that it is normal to have different feelings and not know what to say to the person with the illness. As mentioned last week, if it is an illness with a stigma (mental illness or AIDS) it may make it even harder to handle. If the illness is particularly life threatening, it can be frightening.

You may experience the following emotions:

- Awkwardness
- Fears
- Anger
- Sadness
- Disbelief

These feelings are not unique to you, but by identifying them, you are in a better position to be helpful to your co-worker. The most important thing you can do for yourself and the co-worker with an illness is to communicate. Most employees generally appreciate the interest, support and concern of co-workers. Obviously, your involvement with the employee with chronic illness will depend upon the relationship you had prior to the illness.

Other ways to help:

- Ask the person with the illness if they want to discuss it. Ask if they want to be asked daily or if they prefer to know that you are there to talk if needed.
- Send a card, telephone or visit if a co-worker is on leave or in the hospital
- Ask the person with chronic illness how you can help. Be specific: help with errands, difficult task, meals, etc.
- Keep the office relationship as "normal" as possible
- Offer to find helpful resources



CARING FOR A LOVED ONE WHO IS CHRONICALLY ILL

One of the hardest things in life is coping with illness and pain. In some ways, it can be even harder looking after a loved one who is

ill, than with our own illness. It is not uncommon that it becomes incredibly taxing to your physical and emotional well-being. If you are willing to ask for help and you have a wide support network, you will have an easier time than if you are isolated. To feel really comfortable allowing others to help you is an art that must be learned and practiced. Besides the above crucial step of getting support, there are other things you can do to help yourself. First, understand there are stages that the ill person will go through and to some degree so will you. The following are a list of those stages, but it does not mean you go through all of them the same or in order:

- Crisis
- Isolation
- Anger
- Reconstruction
- Intermittent depression and
- Renewal

Another important task is to educate yourself about the illness that is affecting your family member. Do not be afraid to ask questions.

The following are some tips for caregivers:

- Give yourself permission to be angry or resentful
- Focus on the present
- Nurture yourself!
- Practice forgiveness, you will make mistakes
- Laugh
- Trust your judgment
- Grieve
- Hope
- Ask for help!

Remember if you need additional help; do not hesitate to contact Solutions Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP offers free, confidential assessment, short-term counseling and referral when needed.

***Call Solutions EAP at 1-800-526-3485 for assistance for all of life's challenges.
It's free, confidential and open to your family members.
Check us out on-line at www.solutions-eap.com***