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## Chronic illness

A chronic or long term illness means the person has to adjust to the demands of the illness and the therapy used to treat the condition. There may be additional stresses, since chronic illness might change the way a person lives, sees themselves and relates to others.

### Common stresses

Chronic or long term illness and its treatment poses special problems for the person. They need to learn how to:

- Live with the physical effects of the illness
- Deal with the treatments
- Make sure there is clear communication with doctors
- Maintain emotional balance to cope with negative feelings
- Maintain confidence and a positive self image.

### Additional demands

As well as needing to find ways to deal with the stress involved with chronic illness, the person also needs to:

- Understand the condition
- Know about the treatment and therapy
- Maintain trust and confidence in the doctors, especially when recovery isn't possible
- Know how to control the symptoms
- Maintain social relationships when faced with an uncertain medical future or when symptoms arise
- Avoid social isolation.

### Type of help available

Dealing with the stresses of chronic illness can be demanding and places additional pressure on the person. It is important for the person to speak to their doctor or health care provider about their feelings and how effectively they think they are coping with the illness and its treatment.

### Ways to cope with chronic illness

There is a range of ways to help people deal with the stress of chronic illness. These include:

- **Finding information** - this can help if the person feels helpless or out of control.
- **Emotional support from others** - particularly family and friends, can be a source of great help.
- **Setting concrete, short term goals** - to restore certainty, power and control.
- **Thinking about possible outcomes** - and discussing them with the doctor can help the person to face them before they become a reality.

The overall aim of these strategies is to help the person put their illness into context and give some meaning to what is happening to them.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Mental Health Foundation of Victoria Tel. (03)9427 0406
- International Diabetes Foundation
- National Stroke Foundation.

## Things to remember

- A chronic illness is stressful
- Stress can affect a person's recovery and the way they cope with the illness and its treatment
- There are things to do which help the person come to terms with the new direction their life has taken.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Mental Health Foundation of Australia

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