

5 Coping Tips After Being Newly Diagnosed with Illness

Written by admin

Sunday, 25 September 2011 05:06 - Last Updated Tuesday, 04 October 2011 11:43

By Lisa Copen

I remember the day my life shifted dramatically. I had had weeks of symptoms of swollen joints and inflammation beyond anything I'd ever experienced or even knew existed. My doctor called my place of work and said the rheumatoid factor was positive, which meant that at the age of 24, I most likely had an illness called rheumatoid arthritis. I bravely asked her "On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being normal, what will my life be like?" She avoided the question, not wanting to give me a specific number. But I like to know what I'm up against and so when I asked her again she reluctantly responded "If you are lucky, perhaps a six."

Within days, I realized that everything in my life now be impacted by my disease and that there would be no such thing as "normal" again. Every detail of my life would change from the simple struggle to open a door, to stand from the chair, to walk across the room, or to shift gears in my car. Although my carefree lifestyle and attitude would stay imbedded within my heart and personality, it would take a back seat while I attempted to simply try to learn to function while in severe pain.

A few weeks ago, a friend from high school who was recently diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, searched the internet for information on the disease, and ironically ended up on the Rest Ministries website, where she realized she had known me newly 25 years ago from a high school of only 300 students.

We exchanged a few e-mails and I hope that I was an encouragement to her. This is my best advice for those who have recently been diagnosed with a chronic illness.

[1] Get in touch with the national foundation or organization that is dedicated to supporting people who live with a chronic illness that you have recently been diagnosed with. Explain to them that you have just found out about your diagnosis and that you would like the most basic information. They may drop some brochures to you in the mail or send you to their website.

You may feel torn about taking this step when you have not yet had the chance to grieve or accept your diagnosis. The sooner you can get on their mailing list, however, even if you toss or save the information you receive, the more likely you may find encouraging options for treatment. These organizations will have the most objective information regarding scientific

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research and up to date treatments options. Your doctor may likely suggests medications for you to begin, but as you look at the long list of side effects, you may feel concerned. These organizations will be your best source to base your decisions on.

[2] Set boundaries with yourself about how much you will read about your disease. There are millions of websites, books, podcasts, and magazines, which will tell you how to treat it, cure it, and what alternative treatments to try. Spend a short period of time looking over credible health organization websites so that you know where to go to find helpful information when you need it.

You should be aware of some of the symptoms that may occur because of your illness so that if they do occur, you can attribute them to it. However, don't bury yourself in reading everything you can get your hands on. It will simply become too depressing, and many of the anecdotes that other people share may never apply to your life.

[3] Don't lose hope about your future. They are consistently new scientific discoveries that can and perhaps will change how your illness will progress and will be treated. For example, I recently had four joints replaced in my left hand due to the deformities of rheumatoid arthritis in the last 16 years. But my entire medical team, a hand surgeon, rheumatologist, and physical therapist, all commented that they rarely see these kinds of surgeries now due to the new family of medications available which have slowed down the progression of the disease and the destruction of the joints in the last 10 years.

Even if there is not an immediate cure, as we scientifically grow closer to being able to know our exact DNA, we will be able to pinpoint which medication will best treat our disease, without having to jump from one medication to another, losing months and years sometimes of our health, in order to find which one works best. Hope and a positive outlook will have a profound effect on your disease and your life. So don't give up and assume that your illness will be disabling.

[4] It's important that you have a safe place where you can talk about what you are experiencing emotionally and spiritually, while coming to terms with your new normal living with a chronic illness. This person may be someone who you have met in an online forum for your illness, or it could be someone such as a mentor, pastor, counselor, or even a good friend who is able to listen without judgment. It's most important that you find a place where you can talk about what you are experiencing without judgment or comments such as "no pain, no gain." Also, call and find out about local support groups for your illness, or other support environments such as HopeKeepers, which is a Christian support group for those with illness or pain.

Be sure to acknowledge what your personality is like and how you prefer to receive encouragement. Are you most refreshed by being able to share with another person one-on-one? Or if you are homebound, does signing onto a website each day to receive encouragement or prayer meet your needs? Also, acknowledge that whatever you find that works best for you at this stage, may not work best in six months. Do not feel like you are stuck with your decision in how you receive encouragement. You may not yet feel ready for support group, but next year it may perfectly fits your needs.

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[5] Ask yourself "What foundation do I have in my life that will help me through the difficulties that I will be facing?" Even if your illness does not progress rapidly, the daily aches and pains, as well as the emotional roller coaster and spiritual "why?" questions you will have, will leave you searching for a deeper meaning in life than simply solving your problem with a cup of hot tea. As a Christian myself, I honestly do not know how people live each day with a chronic exasperating illness who do not know the Lord.

This is what keeps me together: believing that my pain is never wasted, and that God always has a purpose and plan for it; acknowledging that God is always in control of my life and that of my circumstances come as a surprise to Him; and firmly surrendering to the fact that He has any specific purpose for my life and that any limitations I have experienced because of my illness will not hinder His plans. Even if you are not a spiritual person, you will likely find yourself facing those middle of the night blues, and I encourage you to look up a biblical websites like Bible Gateway and read through some of the Psalms. If you are unfamiliar with them you may find yourself pleasantly surprised to see that most of the people who live during these times faced severe hardships, deep depression, many doubts, and yes, even chronic illnesses and disabilities.

So to summarize, choose your information wisely, set personal boundaries for how much information you will read, keep hope, find a support system, and then search for that which will get you through the darkest of times when the information and people you have relied on disappoint you. You must discover a purpose in the pain that is greater than that which our world will tell you. Don't ever put life on hold. As the late John Lennon once said, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

If you lead a support group or are considering it, don't miss Lisa Copen's new book, <http://StarAnIllnessSupportGroup.com> for your ministry needs. Over 300 pages with step-by-step instructions on how to write a vision statement, promotion and attendance and much more!

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