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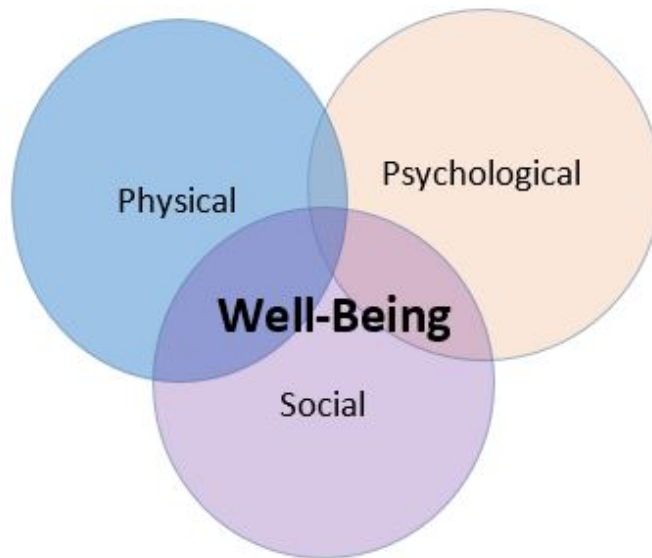
Living with Chronic Illness: Top 10 Tips to Emotional Well-Being

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Did you know that May is Mental Health Month? Mental health is important to overall health and well-being. Having a chronic illness can bring feelings such as fear, sadness and anxiety. Uncertainty about your illness may leave you with many questions, such as, “Will I get better? How will it affect my daily life? Will I need help from others? How will it affect my relationships?” According to the [National Institute of Mental Health \(NIMH\)](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/chronic-illness-mental-health/index.shtml) (https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/chronic-illness-mental-health/index.shtml), people living with a chronic illness may be more likely to suffer from depression. Like chronic

illness, mental health conditions are treatable. There are many strategies to help enhance your well-being so that you can live better with your condition. Caring for both your physical health and emotional well-being can help you cope better with chronic illness.



Below are some tips that may help you work towards emotional well-being:

1. **Learn about and understand your condition** (https://www.hss.edu/conditions_questions-to-ask-doctor.asp): Having the knowledge and information to make the right choices and decisions can help you feel empowered – which is vital to the management of your illness.
2. **Find the right provider for you:** It is important that you feel comfortable expressing yourself and asking questions. To find a provider, you may want to explore a trusted teaching hospital and/or contact your insurance company. You can also talk to others with the same condition for recommendations, such as through a support group, and you can consult with a provider whose opinion you trust.
3. **Speak to your provider about your emotional health:** Your provider needs to know how you are feeling both physically and emotionally. Coping with a chronic illness can increase the stress of everyday life as well as affect your feeling of well-being. Depression and anxiety can make it difficult to manage and treat your condition. Your provider can help you explore the best way to address your feelings, which may include referrals for counseling, talk therapy or sometimes medication. Social workers, psychologists and other mental health providers can help to provide vital support to cope with the challenges of a chronic illness. Additionally, [HSS](http://www.hss.edu) (<http://www.hss.edu>) offers a number of [support and education programs](http://www.hss.edu/social-work-programs) (<http://www.hss.edu/social-work-programs>) that are disease-specific.
4. **Your roles may change as a result of living with a chronic illness:** Chronic illness may shift your priorities and affect your sense of self and identity. Your roles may change in areas such as, work, school, relationships, family planning, and caregiving or you might need some care.

You may experience feelings about these changes and may want to consider talking with someone you trust.

5. **Define your circle of support; know whom you can count on:** Life might change for you, and you may need help with specific tasks or emotional support. Family, friends, neighbors, support groups, religious/spiritual communities and healthcare providers may be necessary to help you at different times or for different reasons. Think about and clearly describe what you need. National voluntary organizations for your specific illness can also provide support and resources.
6. **Acknowledge that chronic illness may present limitations and challenges:** This can be hard and requires some self-compassion. It involves recognizing the need to care for yourself without shame or guilt. Is it reasonable to do it all on your own or to delegate and ask for help? Perhaps you might not have the energy to do everything on your “to-do” list in a given day. Give yourself permission to cross off the items on the bottom and save them for another day.
7. **Identify what is important to you and gives your life meaning and purpose:** For some people, purpose is found through connection to family, friends, love, and volunteerism. Some seek meaning through spirituality and religious affiliation. Explore what you value and enriches your life.
8. **Mindfulness is often recommended as a way to manage stress:** Studies show that mindful based practices are effective in improving the ability to cope with pain and stress. Focus on the here and now. Just 10 minutes of quiet reflection, deep breathing, or guided imagery may bring relief from stress, and can increase your tolerance to it. Take time to listen to music, relax, and try to think of places and feelings that bring you joy. A good resource for guided meditation: <https://www.hss.edu/health-video-library.asp> (<https://www.hss.edu/health-video-library.asp>)
9. **Exercise is an essential part of physical and emotional health:** Recent studies show that exercise improves your [mood](https://www.rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver/Diseases-Conditions/Living-Well-with-Rheumatic-Disease/Exercise-and-Arthritis) (<https://www.rheumatology.org/I-Am-A/Patient-Caregiver/Diseases-Conditions/Living-Well-with-Rheumatic-Disease/Exercise-and-Arthritis>). Remember to consult your provider before starting any exercise program and go at your own pace. In addition, HSS offers [health and wellness classes](https://www.hss.edu/public-patient-education.asp) (<https://www.hss.edu/public-patient-education.asp>), or check community organizations, the local YMCA, or your nearby hospital for the programs offered. Walking is also an excellent option, as it is free, and you can do it almost anywhere.
10. **It is vital for your spirit to find ways to have joy and to have goals, both big and small:** Every day, do something that reaffirms the beauty and joy of living. Make time to grab a cup of coffee with a friend or loved one; or change your route home, and take a walk through the park, paying special attention to the sights, colors and sounds around you.

When we talk about health, we acknowledge the whole person. Make use of the tools, resources and activities that benefit both mind and body together.



Susan Rodriguez is a Licensed [Social Worker](https://www.hss.edu/social-work-programs.asp) (<https://www.hss.edu/social-work-programs.asp>) at [HSS](http://www.hss.edu) (<http://www.hss.edu>). She works with adult patients who are 18-59 years of age in the [Ambulatory Care Center](https://www.hss.edu/ambulatory-care-center.asp) (<https://www.hss.edu/ambulatory-care-center.asp>) and [Department of Medicine](https://www.hss.edu/medicine.asp) (<https://www.hss.edu/medicine.asp>). Ms. Rodriguez works with patients who are newly diagnosed or coping with chronic rheumatologic disease. She provides support and services ranging from emotional support to referrals for community resources that can assist in enhancing the quality of life and adjustment to acute and chronic conditions. Ms. Rodriguez has a keen interest and experience in the psychotherapeutic management of chronic pain. Ms. Rodriguez obtained her Bachelor's Degree in Psychology at CUNY-Hunter College, and her Master of Social Work Degree at Columbia University School of Social Work.

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