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Five ways to combat mental fatigue

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By Kate Silver

Illness can be exhausting and not just in the physical sense. When someone learns they have a chronic disease, whether it’s cancer, leukemia or another condition, it can be a lifealtering experience, according to Rosalind S. Dorlen, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at Overlook Medical Center in Summit, NJ. “It’s rare that I come across a person, post diagnosis, who hasn’t experienced shock, fear or denial,” says Dorlen. Many can feel like their prior sense of comfort, joy and connection with the world is

somehow violated. “It can often create feelings of chaos and confusion, which can lead to a complete mental overload.”

Not to mention exhaustion. There are doctors’ visits, treatments, possible complications, insurance and financial concerns, appointments with specialists, excessive online information and worrying about what the present and future hold. With all these burning questions surrounding chronic disease—which Dorlen refers to as a person’s “new normal”—it can bring on a profound sense of emotional fatigue. “When we are dealing with this kind of fatigue, it means a person is likely experiencing really difficult thoughts, feelings and attitudes,” says Dorlen. Just as the fatigue itself can be a result of mental exhaustion, the response to it may be a matter of mental conditioning. Dorlen shared this advice on how to cope with chronic illness and the psychological fatigue it may bring.

Attitude can make a difference

How a person copes with bad news isn’t just about the bad news itself. The person’s own thoughts and perceptions make a big difference as well, advises Dorlen. “It’s our attitude that may determine how resilient or not resilient we are or how we react to a health crisis,” she says. According to Dorlen, there are certain traits that can help you cope better with illness, and one of those is flexibility. “Maintaining a flexible mindset can give you a better capacity for resilience,” she says. Maybe flexibility isn’t your thing? The good news—it can be learned. Dorlen says to start by mixing up your routine. It could be writing with your nondominant hand, taking a different route to work or shopping at an off-the-beaten-path store. “Though simple, these small experiments are activities that can help you enhance your flexibility and turn it into a skill,” she notes.

Cultivate gratitude

“I ask most of the people I work with to think about gratitude every day,” says Dorlen. She asks her patients to keep a journal and write down three things each day that they appreciate. These could be simple things, like the sunrise, a tasty meal or a beautiful flower. It makes a difference. “When you are challenged with life circumstances that are beyond your control, a dose of appreciation can help change your outlook,” she says.

Take care of yourself

When you’re exhausted, everything feels a little more difficult. A cheeseburger might sound better than a salad. Making it to the gym might seem like a feat of impossible strength. If you’re stressed and worried, even getting a full night’s sleep might sound like a fantasy, despite your exhaustion. But it’s important to strive for a healthy routine. “No matter your circumstances—self-care must be a priority,” insists Dorlen. By eating a nutritious diet and working toward quality sleep, you may improve not only your outlook, but your energy levels. Also, by incorporating some kind of physical activity, you may also see big returns. “Exercise reduces anxiety and enhances well-being, and I tell that to every patient I see,” says Dorlen. (Note: Always consult a doctor before starting any new health routine.)

Lower your stress levels

A chronic illness can add a whole new level of stress to your life. Dorlen encourages engaging in mindful meditation as a way to manage stress. “You don’t have to go to a dedicated meditation studio either; there are many different apps available that help you practice mindfulness in your own home and throughout the day,” she says.

Spend time with others

Being around other people can help you become more understanding, and that, in turn, can inform you on your own journey, notes Dorlen. “We found that one thing that may help people cope with illness and the potential side effects of illness has to do with nurturing their own empathy,” she says. She suggests a number of ways of connecting with others: find a support group that helps people with your illness; visit your local community or senior center and spend time with new faces; lend a helping hand at a volunteer organization and reach out to friends and family to schedule get-togethers.

You can’t control being ill, but you can control how you respond to that illness, and that response can empower and energize you. Dorlen says that when people get over the initial shock and isolation of chronic illness, there may be a silver lining. “It can move you to ‘rally your resources’ and reach out,” she says. “Often, before you know it, you’ve created a new community.” That, in turn, can lead to growth, understanding and a deeper appreciation for allthat you have.

The information contained within this article is based upon the knowledge and opinions of the author and experts.