

Coping with a Sudden Illness or Disability

Objective

To successfully cope and thrive even when you experience a sudden illness or disability.

What to Know

Sudden illness or disability often causes significant life changes, and the adjustment period may be challenging. Initially, you may feel overwhelmed and fearful as you focus on what you have lost. Your emotions are valid and normal, but remember you have control over how you respond—even to the most difficult of situations. Living a fulfilling, happy life is still possible. Here are some suggestions to help you cope.

Take time to mourn. Before you move on and accept your situation, allow yourself time to grieve. You have suffered major losses, including the loss of your healthy, unlimited body and hopes and dreams for the future. You might want to avoid painful emotions but judging, ignoring, or suppressing your feelings may slow your healing process. Like a roller coaster, there might be unpredictable ups and downs. With time, the lows will become less intense, and you will begin to find your new “normal.”

Accept and forgive. Healthy coping involves acceptance and forgiveness. Perhaps you blame yourself or someone else for your disability. Acceptance might feel like giving in or giving up, but refusing to accept reality prevents you from moving forward, making necessary changes, and setting new goals.

Share how you feel. Having bad days does not mean you are not courageous or strong. Pretending you are okay when you are *not* okay does not help anyone—including your loved ones. Let your family and friends know how you are really feeling.

Come to terms with your new reality. It is healthy to allow yourself time to grieve, but it is not helpful to frequently look back and wish for a return to “normal.” Avoid focusing on what you can no longer do. Instead, focus on what you can do and what you hope to do.

You can be happy again. It may not seem like it, but you can build a happy, meaningful life for yourself. Read inspiring stories of people with disabilities who are thriving and living joyful lives. Their successes can help you stay motivated during dark times.

Educate yourself. Obsessing over negative medical information is counterproductive, but it is important to understand what you are facing. What is the typical progression? What are common complications? There are many questions you can ask and knowing what to expect can help you prepare yourself and adapt.

Minimize the impact. Your life has probably changed in big ways. You may have limitations that make things more difficult. But with commitment, flexibility, creativity, and a willingness to do things differently, you can find ways to reduce the impact on your life. If needed, use adaptive technologies and tools. If you require a device such as a prosthetic, cane, or wheelchair to make your life easier, then use it. Let go of embarrassment or fear of stigma.

Advocate for yourself. As you negotiate life challenges—including at work and within the healthcare system—you are your own best advocate. Educate yourself about your rights and the available resources. Eventually you may feel less helpless and more empowered.

Be patient as you set realistic goals. You will learn new skills and strategies, and you might even need to relearn simple things you used to take for granted. This can be frustrating, and you might want to rush things to get back to functioning as quickly as possible. Remain realistic because setting overly ambitious goals can lead to setbacks and discouragement.

Nurture important relationships. Spending time with loved ones will help you stay positive, healthy, and hopeful.

Join a support group. You can reduce loneliness and isolation by participating in a support group for people dealing with similar challenges. Realizing you are not alone—and benefiting from the collective wisdom of the group—can be enormously helpful. You can share struggles, solutions, and encouragement.

Ask for and accept help. Refusing to seek out needed assistance can delay your progress or make things worse. Let go of fear that asking for support will inspire pity from others.

See a mental health professional. While loved ones can provide support, you may also want to talk to a therapist or counselor. Mental health professionals can help you process change, manage grief, problem-solve, and reframe your outlook in positive, realistic ways.

Find meaning and purpose. You might question your identity, wondering what your value is and where you fit in society. You might begin to feel useless and empty. So, it is important to find things that make you feel good about yourself—giving you a renewed sense of meaning and purpose.

Volunteer. You can feel more productive and make a difference when you offer your time to a charity or non-profit organization. You can volunteer even if you have limited mobility or cannot work. Choose a cause you are passionate about and get involved.

Find new hobbies and pleasurable activities. Perhaps the activities you used to enjoy are more difficult or even impossible to do. Identify creative ways to participate in old favorites or develop new interests. Finding new, fun activities will help you stay engaged—and benefit your mental health.

Give back. Perhaps you have accepted help from friends and family, and you would like to find ways to reciprocate. For example, maybe you are tech-savvy, so you help a tech-challenged friend. Or maybe you are a great listener, and your friend knows they can count on you as they navigate a difficult divorce. You can write a letter or thank you card to express your appreciation.

Care for an animal. Animals can bring joy and companionship into your life and help you feel less isolated. If you cannot have a pet, there are other ways to find animal companionship, including volunteering at a local animal shelter.

Make health a priority. To feel your best, support and strengthen your health with exercise, a healthy diet, plenty of sleep, and effective stress management.

- **Exercise.** Get regular exercise in any way you can. Exercise helps manage anxiety and depression, relieve tension, reduce stress, and improve sleep. As you get more physically fit, you will feel stronger and more confident.
 - Start small, take it easy, and build from there to avoid injury. Find creative ways to increase the amount of physical activity you do in small, incremental steps.
 - Instead of focusing on what you cannot do, find activities that are possible.
 - Listen to your body. Stop exercising and call your doctor if you feel pain, dizziness, shortness of breath, develop chest pain or pressure, or break out in a cold sweat.
 - Avoid comparing yourself to others (or to your past self).
- **Eat healthy.** Nutritious eating is important for everyone—even more so when you have physical limitations or chronic illness. Eating well boosts energy and promotes vitality. While eating healthy may not be easy, even small changes can make a positive impact.
 - Notice how you feel after eating, because when you eat healthy, balanced meals, you might feel more energetic and satisfied. If you eat junk food or unhealthy foods, you may not feel good.
 - Eat high-quality protein because it is essential for healing and immune system functioning.
 - Reduce sugar and refined carbohydrates because these foods lead to mood and energy crashes.
 - Drink plenty of water to stay properly hydrated and flush your system of waste and toxins. When you are dehydrated, you do not feel as good.
- **Get plenty of rest.** Establish a regular sleep schedule, create relaxing bedtime routines, and turn off electronic devices at least one hour before sleep. Aim for 7 to 9 hours of restful sleep.
- **Manage stress.** Practice relaxation techniques, create a healthy work-life balance, and identify healthy coping strategies.

Focus on the present. Focusing on the now is essential to moving forward. Thinking about the past or worrying about the future is not helpful. Celebrate each small step or victory you experience.

Never give up. Find tools and coping mechanisms that will allow you to build your new reality.

Adjusting to life with a disability can be difficult. While you cannot go back in time to a healthier you or wish away your limitations, you can change the way you think about and cope with your disability. You are still in control of your life and there are ways to increase your independence and sense of empowerment, as well as improve your outlook. This worksheet will help you do just that.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Describe your disability or chronic illness.

Is your disability visible unable to be easily seen by others? Explain.

Describe the ways your disability affects your physical, emotional, and mental health.

What are the ways you have been treated “differently” because of the disability?

In what ways have you suffered (or currently suffer) because of the disability?

Using the suggestions above, use the chart for the next two weeks to record the activities you do to cope and thrive. Write down the date, activity/suggestion/tip you tried, and describe

Date	Suggestion	What Worked Well	What Didn't Work Well	Change/modification

Reflections on This Exercise

Did completing this exercise help you cope and begin to thrive? Why or why not?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this activity?
