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Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time

Issue #6:

RESILIENCE THROUGH CHRONIC PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

What Are Chronic Physical Conditions And How Do They Affect Us?

Mental and physical health are fundamentally linked. [1, 2, 3, 4] So it's only natural that a cycle of illness may predispose someone to feelings or disorders contrary to their emotional well-being. But what happens when someone's illness does not have a firm beginning, middle and end? What if the disorder or disease is one that never really goes away? If the condition is permanent and chronic, the implications are enormous.

A chronic physical condition (CPC) is one that is persistent, comes about over time and is long lasting in effect. CPCs typically last in excess of three months, and though they are frequently managed with medication or may go into remission, they can never be fully cured. It's a tremendous burden to bear. Indeed, treatment of chronic disease consumes 67% of all direct health care expenses, costing the Canadian economy $190 billion annually, with $68 billion attributed to treatment and the remainder to lost productivity.[4]

Mental health disorders can often manifest themselves when an individual is suffering from a CPC, as the individual often feels their quality of life is worse off and they have become a burden to their family, friends, or co-workers.

With the added struggles of dealing with a CPC and the effects on one's mental health, collectively we need to become more conscious about how we give support to those who are suffering.

Types of chronic physical conditions

Like most health challenges, CPCs come in varying forms and degrees. From those outwardly obvious, to those often deemed "invisible", CPCs run the gamut. Some of the most common CPCs include (but are not limited to):

- Arthritis and Rheumatism
- Diabetes
- Heart Disease (and sometimes stroke)
- Cancer
- Asthma, COPD and other Respiratory Disorders
- Hypertension
- Weight Disorders (Obesity, being underweight)
- Viral Diseases (i.e.: HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C)

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And while the physical symptoms of these conditions may present their own unique difficulties, the sobering reality for those suffering from them is that their mental health often suffers at the same time.

Supporting someone with a chronic physical condition

What can you do to support someone dealing with a CPC in ways that underscore acceptance, and don't play into stigmas or disempowerment?

Be sensitive to not knowing. Though some CPCs may be obvious due to outward appearances, others aren't evident at first glance or even with extended contact. So be aware, non-judgmental and thoughtful in your conversations or commentary with or about others, especially where physical conditions are concerned. Your indirect empathy and compassion may have unrealized implications, but are powerful, nonetheless.

Learn about their chronic physical condition. Ask or do some research on your own to understand the symptoms and specific challenges of their CPC – it goes a long way in understanding what they're dealing with and opens the door for communication and empathy.

Accept the realities of the condition. Remember, you can't fix the condition or make them better; rather you're there to support them as they cope with their symptoms.

Listen. Allow the person to share their feelings while empathizing and validating their experiences.

Offer to help with transportation. For some, getting to medical consultations or physical therapies can be an ongoing logistical challenge. Offering a ride to appointments is a friendly gesture and much appreciated way to lend support.

When appropriate, acknowledge their condition. Ignoring someone's CPC can lead to them feeling insecure, inadequate and even more isolated. So, when appropriate, ask how they are, then believe and validate what they tell you.

Encourage them to be physically, mentally and socially active. Invite them to engage in enjoyable, stimulating activities to alleviate some of the isolation that may occur due to living with a CPC.

Be conscious of when they may want space or privacy. Respecting their wishes and boundaries is essential when providing support.

Supporting yourself with a chronic physical condition

When you are physically limited and feel those around you are unable to relate, feelings of isolation and loneliness can be overwhelming. This perfect storm is a common recipe that could contribute to the development of a mental health disorder. If you are living with a chronic physical condition, it's one of the most important reasons to make supporting yourself a priority.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, 80% of heart disease, diabetes and respiratory diseases, and 40% of cancers are preventable by eliminating four common risk factors: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and the harmful use of alcohol.[4] It goes without saying that cutting out these same CPC risk factors often does wonders to alleviate symptoms and contribute to the overall mental and physical health of those already suffering from chronic illness. This information is vital in developing a personal strategy to support yourself with a CPC.

Here are recommended approaches:

- **Stop smoking.** If you need help, reach out to your family doctor or check for smoking cessation assistance that may be offered through your employer or EFAP provider.
- **Make healthy food choices.** At home, make an effort to prepare three, balanced meals a day. Keep your fridge stocked with fruits, vegetables and healthy alternatives to junk food. Make lunches and snacks for work that will sustain your mind and body. Try staples like nuts, cheeses, yogurts and raw produce. The more prepared you are when unhealthy cravings surface, the more likely you are to be able to curb them with something that positively fuels you.
- **Get active.** Seek out physical activities that are possible with your CPC and make engaging in them a priority. If possible, take the stairs at work or park a little further from the door to get in some extra walking. Do some conscious stretching at your desk. Look into a personal trainer who can tailor a program that is safe and respectful of your CPC but also encourages your physical strength and well-being. Increasingly, communities are creating therapeutic programs specifically geared to those living with chronic illness. Talk to the coordinator of your local community centre to see what options may be a good fit for you.
- **Reduce your alcohol intake.** Be mindful of how much, when and for what reasons you drink. If you find drinking comes into play in ways that are less than optimal for your health (i.e.: to help manage pain/as a coping mechanism) or you are drinking too frequently, be honest with yourself and take steps to remove alcohol from your lifestyle altogether or moderate the amount that you drink.
- **Explore support at the workplace.** If you're comfortable doing so, talk to your boss, co-workers or the human resources department to see what accommodations can be made to help you perform at your very best while coping with your CPC.
- **Bring awareness of CPCs to those around you.** At work or in your personal life, very often those around you may be eager to learn about and actively support you in dealing with CPCs. Offer to talk about your own experiences or share literature or resources you have found helpful. This can foster deeper relationships and understanding.
- **Check your employer's insurance plan** to see what support and services are available, utilizing the resources available to you.
- **Set realistic expectations and be gentle with yourself.** CPCs are often, by nature, unpredictable, so be prepared to be flexible and forgiving with yourself as you navigate your symptoms.
- **Remember, you aren't alone.** There are others dealing with CPCs and many people willing to help. Reach out to friends, family, colleagues, community groups, health centres and online forums to get the emotional and physical support you need.

Sources:

[1] "The Relationship Between Mental Health, Mental Illness And Chronic Physical Conditions | CMHA Ontario". Ontario.cmha.ca. N. p., 2017. Web.

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[3] "Report From The Canadian Chronic Disease Surveillance System: Mental Illness In Canada, 2015." Public Health Agency of Canada. Healthycanadians.gc.ca, May 2015. Web.

[4] Elmslie, Kimberly. "Against The Growing Burden of Disease." Public Health Agency of Canada. Public Health Agency of Canada, n.d. Web. <http://www.ccgh-csih.ca/assets/Elmslie.pdf>

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