

Living with Chronic Illness

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BY SARAH LIEBERMAN, LMSW

What does a retired postal worker, a practicing social worker and a musician have in common? Not much at first glance, but they, like many other people -- spouses, parents, adult children and your friends -- might just be struggling with chronic illnesses and the daily challenges they present.

Chronic illness -- long-lasting, usually incurable conditions or diseases -- surrounds us, whether we're aware of it or not. Heart disease, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, chronic fatigue syndrome and cancer abound. It can have multiple effects. Individuals can be tired, and not just physically tired, but also emotionally drained from all that is needed to be done to manage the illness. As people are living longer, and medical treatments continue to advance, the prevalence of chronic illness is increasing, and even those who are ill are living longer and fuller lives.

One key to maintaining that full life is having support and knowledge about managing chronic illness.

Learning how to advocate for one's self is a very important part of living with a long-term condition. Getting family, friends and others in your inner circle to understand what you are struggling with and challenged by is difficult but critical. Learn how to explain succinctly your symptoms and their effects, almost the "elevator pitch" for your illness. Find resources by searching the Internet or calling friends or a local support agency. Reach out and let a friend know when you need a ride or a listening ear.

Caregivers also have unique challenges when caring for someone who is chronically ill. When the initial diagnosis is made, it is easier to muster concern and empathy. But when the event is not acute, but

chronic, family, friends and other caregivers naturally become accustomed to the status quo, and it may be difficult to avoid what might be called "compassion-fatigue." Sharing your struggles to support a loved one with others in a similar situation can help you avoid burnout. As a caregiver, your own self-care is important.

Living with a chronic illness can be lonely, and not just for the ill person. Both those who are ill and those who are caring for them can benefit from advocacy and support. There are resources in the community, and learning to tap into those resources is key. Finding a support group, whether general or more specific to your disease, may help you feel less alone. Sharing ideas and resources often can be invaluable. Westchester Jewish Community Services facilitates a chronic illness support group called Connecting with Others. The group meets regularly and has become a vital, supportive environment for all its members.

Through the WJCS Pathways to Care program, funded by a grant from UJA-Federation of New York, social workers provide support to adults with chronic and life-limiting illnesses, and also to their families. In addition, with grants from the Alzheimer's Association and the Westchester County Department of Senior Programs and Services, the program provides support to caregivers, both individually and through caregiver support groups.

Whether you are the one living with a chronic illness, or you are caring for someone with such an illness, you are not alone. Joining a support group can be just the relief that you need.

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