# **How Can Therapy Address Depression Associated with Chronic Illness?**

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People who have chronic illness are more likely to develop depression. People with depression are more likely to develop chronic illness. But did you know that depression is treatable even with chronic illness?

**WHAT IS CHRONIC ILLNESS?**

A [chronic illness](https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/disabilities) is loosely defined as:

* A condition that lasts 3 months or longer
* Is not preventable by vaccination
* Has no existing cure

Some of the most common chronic illnesses (diseases) include heart disease, stroke, and [chronic pain](https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/chronic-pain). It is estimated that over 100 million Americans are living with at least one chronic illness, and most are living with at least two illnesses. Many chronic illnesses are not diagnosed correctly or right away. It can be incredibly taxing emotionally to know something is not right with you physically, and yet, not to be able to get a [diagnosis](https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/diagnosis) and treatment.

Once diagnosed, additional problems can arise. Typically, treatment most often focuses on the physical part of the disease; meanwhile, the emotional aspects may not be given appropriate attention. In the beginning and throughout the course of a chronic illness, it may be hard for you to define how you are feeling.

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**PROCESSING A CHRONIC ILLNESS DIAGNOSIS**

A chronic illness diagnosis can lead to a feeling of loss of sense of self. You may be told to cut back on or eliminate certain activities. Changes in diet and exercise might be necessary. Surgery could be mentioned, and maybe you’ve never had surgery. Many things can change once you are diagnosed.

But you look the same. Most chronic illnesses are invisible, and this can make it more difficult for you to feel as if you are being understood. It can be confusing, as well. What you see in the mirror is not always a correct representation of how you feel on the inside.

If it is difficult for you to process, you can guarantee it is difficult for many others. Feeling as though you have to explain your symptoms to others can be exhausting. It takes a lot of energy to function daily with chronic illness, and those who don’t have a chronic illness can have a hard time understanding this. It may feel like you are constantly having to defend yourself.

Emotionally, you may wonder if you will ever feel like your old self again. You may worry loved ones won’t understand. You may have to change some of your habits, decrease responsibilities at work and home, and your social life may take a hit. Some changes may be relatively easy to implement, and others may prove to be more difficult. [Depression](https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/depression) can develop as a result of having to make life-altering changes, even when making these changes will increase your chances of surviving your illness.

**HOW THERAPY CAN HELP WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS AND DEPRESSION**

If you have been living with chronic illness for a while, depression may develop for a variety of reasons. You may feel as though you can’t participate in life as fully as your peers. You may find it difficult to date or to conceive children because of your illness. You may feel like your friends, family, or spouse/partner are tired of hearing about your symptoms. Long term management of chronic illness can cause feelings of [isolation](https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/isolation) and lead to depression.

If you have been living with depression, you may find it hard to maintain good physical health. It can be difficult to eat well, exercise, and get the right amount of sleep when you are depressed. Some of the [medications](https://www.goodtherapy.org/drugs/antidepressants.html) prescribed for depression have side effects that impact physical health such as weight gain and an increase in cholesterol. Not maintaining good physical health could also increase the chances that a chronic illness may develop. Depression may cause you to delay seeking treatment for a chronic illness.

Therapy can play an important role in managing chronic illness and treating depression, offering hope and a place of healing. Therapy can:

* Help you explore your feelings about chronic illness and depression.
* Allow you to develop coping skills to manage the emotional and physical aspects of chronic illness.
* Teach you about how your thoughts affect your emotions and behavior.
* Help you uncover underlying beliefs about chronic illness and depression, allowing you to develop new beliefs and thoughts about your illness.
* Support you in learning how to advocate for yourself.

By improving the ways in which you think about your illness, you may improve the physical aspects as well. Therapy can help you manage chronic pain in part by helping decrease [stress](https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/issues/stress), which is a contributing factor to heart disease and stroke. In general, therapy can help you find your lost sense of self, handle overwhelming feelings, and improve your [confidence](https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/psychpedia/confidence) when it comes to managing day-to-day struggles with chronic illness.

Finally, it can be even more beneficial to [find a therapist](https://www.goodtherapy.org/find-therapist.html) who specializes in the treatment of individuals with chronic illness. It is likely these therapists have a personal or deeper understanding of what it is like to live with chronic illness. Don’t be afraid to ask a therapist about their understanding of chronic illness.

**References:**

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