

WHEN EMOTIONS RUN HIGH...



Living with daily chronic pain for months or years can create serious emotional distress which is completely understandable.

People who suffer from chronic pain may feel discouraged, sad, afraid and sometimes, even angry. Such feelings are normal reactions, but over time they can add to a person's overall suffering. When such emotions persist, they not only add to overall suffering, but also, intensify pain and reduce your ability to cope.

This brochure discusses some of the emotions most commonly experienced by people who suffer from chronic pain. It offers ideas to help you overcome these feelings, and suggests where to find help if you need it.

You think, therefore you feel!

How you feel has a lot to do with how you think about your pain. For example, if you think that you're going to be in this condition for the rest of your life, or if you refuse to accept your situation, you will probably feel discouraged and anxious.

Confronting paralyzing fear

One of the first emotions people experience when pain persists is worry, associated with the fact that they don't understand what's happening to them. This leads to feelings of powerlessness and anxiety. You might be afraid that the pain will increase over time, or that you won't have the resources to handle things down the road. Problems arise not when you *feel* such emotions, but when you become paralyzed by them. Emotions are considered "paralyzing" when they prevent you from living your life fully.

The sense of losing control is often the result of not knowing how to deal with your problems. The more you understand the "how and why" of your emotions, the better you can manage them and take charge of your situation. And when you feel more in control, you can develop appropriate strategies for dealing with the pain as well as the resulting physical limitations.

Learn and adapt

When pain persists and seems to be here to stay, you are likely to feel sad and frustrated. These are common emotions people feel whenever life takes a dramatic turn. There's no denying that your life has changed: you can no longer do all the things you used to do so easily. But when these feelings arise, it's best to focus on the strengths or capacities you still have. It doesn't help to keep complaining about what you've lost; instead, look at all the things you can still do!

Why not learn to do things differently? You can figure out new ways to perform daily tasks and explore new kinds of leisure activities. You may even discover an enjoyable activity you never considered before. In other words, you have to find creative new ways to adapt to your situation, using your current capabilities (not those you had before you were in pain). Doing so will maintain or even improve your self-esteem. And increased self-confidence can keep you hopeful and help you find new meaning in your life.

Why me?

Asking "why me?" can make you feel like a victim. Of course, it's normal to feel that the situation is unfair, but focusing on this feeling will only make you angry. Nobody deserves to suffer from chronic pain. However, continuing to feel sorry for yourself can prevent you from learning to cope with your new reality. Persisting anger and blame cause considerable suffering of their own, not to mention the significant physical tension they produce, which has a direct impact on your pain. When you stop asking "why" this is happening to you, you will gradually feel less like a victim. And when you feel more in control, you can take charge of your pain.

Confronting these difficult emotions is a first step to improving your mood and taking better care of yourself. In the process, you tell yourself that you are important to yourself and that you matter. You thus gain more control over your pain by reducing the emotional suffering it causes.

Where can I get help?

If you feel overwhelmed by your emotions and unable to control them, you need to speak to a chronic pain expert, such as a psychologist, a doctor or a nurse. A specialized health care professional can help you develop the strategies you need to understand what's happening to you and live the best possible way with your chronic pain.

Chronic pain specialists can help you in a crisis – such as when you are very scared or discouraged by your pain – but they are also available at other times to guide you and help you cope with your chronic problem. And that can gradually give your life meaning again!