

Prescriptions for the Heart

Coping with a Chronic Illness

A chronic illness is a disease or long-term medical condition that can affect your social life, emotional stability, finances, and even your spiritual health, in addition to your physical health. There are ways to cope with and accommodate to the lifestyle changes that may occur as a result of a chronic illness. It is our prayer that God's word will encourage and help you adjust to these changes, whatever they may be.

Being diagnosed with a chronic illness is just the beginning. You may need to see numerous specialists, experience pain during examinations or procedures, or require repeated hospitalizations. You may feel stuck in a cycle from which there seems no escape. In times like this, your faith may be challenged, and you may feel disappointed or angry, forgotten or even abandoned by God. These are normal feelings that often accompany an illness. Should this happen, be sure to share your feelings with those willing to accept and support you. But keep in mind that your greatest encouragement may come through prayer and reading God's Word, which assures us that nothing can separate us from the Love of God.

The apostle Paul, who certainly had endured many hardships, wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).¹ Surely if the things listed here cannot separate us from God's love, then we can count on the Lord to love us through our struggle with chronic illness, including doubts and fears that may plague us from time to time.

Not only can our faith can be a source of confidence in God's love, but we can derive courage from knowing that He is with us and does not want us to be afraid. In fact, the phrase "do not be afraid" is one of the most common in both the Old and New Testaments. Here is what Jesus said once to His own disciples, when they were worried that He was going to leave them soon: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid" (John 14:27). He is a friend who will never leave us or forsake us. "And surely I am with you always," He promised His followers, "to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Your experience with chronic illness can be an opportunity to pray for a greater sense of His presence to help in time of need.

A sense of inner peace is also often linked to faith, and this sense of peace may even contribute to a better outcome in relation to your illness, long-term. While distress and anxiety, especially the anxiety of not being in control, can accompany any illness, prayer and focusing on more positive things can become your allies as you learn to live with chronic illness.

As the apostle Paul wrote: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Philippians 4:6-8).

Your faith in God can give you peace of mind and ease your worries. The Bible says "...when you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet" (Proverbs 3:24). And your hope in Him will be like an anchor for your soul when the storms of life threaten, "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure..." (Hebrews 6:19). But, if you become discouraged, try to stay strong in your faith. As it says in the Psalms, "When anxiety is great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul" (Psalm 94:19).

Many times a doctor can only treat the symptoms, not provide a cure. However, the combination of symptom management and faith can help many patients live longer happier lives. Understand your own coping process and identify the challenges. Faith can help change your attitude about life and enable you to feel hopeful. It is our prayer that your faith will be strengthened as you cope with your chronic illness.

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