

# balance

Balance your work, health, life with useful health and wellness information

## How to Cope with a Serious Medical Diagnosis

When you receive the news that you have a serious medical condition – whether it is cancer, heart disease, diabetes or some other condition – it can shake you to the core. Suddenly you're faced with the reality of a health challenge that you may not have expected and you're left riding an emotional rollercoaster.

Like losing a loved one, people who are diagnosed with a serious medical condition often experience five stages of grief as they come to terms with their new reality. Understanding the stages and recognizing what you're going through will help keep you focused on your ultimate emotional goal: acceptance and mental well-being.

### Recognizing the five steps of coping with a medical diagnosis

**Stage 1 – Denial:** This is typically the first emotion that surfaces upon receiving your diagnosis. Your first reaction may be: *This isn't possible – I don't feel sick! This has to be a mistake – I'm too young for this!* At this stage, the blow of the news is ricocheting through your mind as you try to comprehend the reality of the situation. You're in shock.

**Stage 2 – Anger:** The next stage is even more tumultuous as you start to face what the medical diagnosis will really mean for your life. The sickness, the treatments, the appointments, the life changes all weigh heavily on your mind and you're left wading in a pool of negative thoughts and hostility. You're angry, and your anger may be targeted at the doctor who diagnosed you, family, friends or even random strangers.

**Stage 3 – Bargaining:** When we feel vulnerable or helpless, our natural reaction is to try and regain control of our life. For some, this means bargaining with a higher power, while others seek a second opinion hoping for different results. Lifestyle changes may creep in at this stage – which can certainly help your overall health – however, they may not change the diagnosis.

**Stage 4 – Depression:** This stage is characterized by feelings of loneliness and sadness, and you may find yourself pulling away and distancing yourself from loved ones. You'll feel like the people you love and who love you don't understand what you're going through and this can feel extremely isolating; many pull inward as a result. At this stage, many people who have been diagnosed with a serious illness are also mourning the loss of their former self – their healthier self and the life that went with it.

**Stage 5 – Acceptance:** The final stage is one marked by a sense of calm. While you are not necessarily happy in the traditional sense, you have come to accept the diagnosis and have ceased your internal fight against it. In this stage, you may:

- Accept that your life will be different because of the illness
- Allow yourself to find joy in joyful experiences
- Continue educating yourself about the condition so you can better manage it
- Take steps to improve your health through diet and exercise, understanding that it is not likely to cure your illness but will improve your health in general
- Focus more on gratitude knowing that in many cases there are treatment options available

Receiving a medical diagnosis about a serious illness will always be hard to hear and difficult to accept. While you may not be able to control the physical manifestation of your condition, you can take steps to minimize how it affects you mentally. Allow yourself time to grieve about your diagnosis and recognize the stages as you progress through them, striving for acceptance.

Looking for additional support? Your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) can help. You can receive support through a variety of resources. Call your EFAP at 1 800 387-4765 or visit [workhealthlife.com](http://workhealthlife.com).

## How to Ease the Emotional Burden of a Serious Medical Diagnosis

Learning that you are sick with a serious illness is a bitter pill to swallow. Not only is your body fighting a battle, but your mind is as well. As you strive to improve your health, it is important that you also take steps to care for your mental well-being.

### Six Helpful Tips to Help Manage the Mental Toll of a Medical Diagnosis

#### Seek out support from people who understand

You may have the most supportive spouse, a great group of friends and a loving family, but despite their best efforts, they don't completely understand what you're going through. That's why connecting with people who share your struggles can be a powerful way to cope with your diagnosis. Support groups, for example, allow you to express your fears without worrying about how your feelings will affect others. In addition, you'll learn new coping strategies from people who are going through the same struggle.

#### Take a break and accept help

Even if you're feeling good physically, chances are the diagnosis will be weighing heavily on your mind. That's why it's important to accept help from others even if you feel you don't need it. This could include simple things like allowing loved ones to take you to your appointments or to tidy up around the house. By reducing your workload at home, you make space in your schedule for more relaxing and enjoyable activities that can give your mood a positive boost.

#### Relax

Living with a serious illness can occupy your mind and cause stress. That's why it's important to practice relaxation techniques that can take your mind off your diagnosis. The key is to find relaxing or fun activities that are effective de-stressors for you, and to regularly make room for them in your schedule. Meditation, yoga, exercise, reading, games and even a trip to the movies are all great ways to take a mental break and relax.

#### Take control of your health

For many, being diagnosed with a serious medical condition conjures up feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. Take back control and combat these feelings by:

- Following your doctor's orders and making yourself a priority
- Becoming your own health-care advocate by asking probing questions if you need more information
- Researching your condition to learn how to best manage it
- Following a healthy diet and exercise program that is approved by your doctor

#### Get away from the daily grind

Vacations or even simple weekends out of town are tried-and-true ways to relax and unwind. Whether it is sun and sand or a stay-cation in the city, stepping away from your daily life will help you take a much-needed mental break. Just be sure to check with your doctor to get the all-clear before heading out of town.

#### Stick to your daily schedule

While it is critical that you find time to relax and de-stress, it is also important for your mental health to remain busy. Stick to your daily schedule as much as possible. Find time to meet up with friends and family or take on a hobby that brings you joy. However, don't forget to also schedule sufficient downtime.

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Being diagnosed with a serious medical condition affects people differently. For some, it quickly becomes a new stage of life that needs to be managed, while for others it is a devastating blow. Learning how to best cope with the emotional toll of your diagnosis is as individual as you are and will largely depend on your personality, your condition and your interests. If you continue to struggle, seek help from your doctor or contact your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) provider.

#### Resources:

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/2006/the-5-stages-of-loss-and-grief/>

<https://www.workhealthlife.com/search.aspx?q=D%3AL%3Ai%3AL%3Aa%3AL%3Ag%3AL%3An%3AL%3Ao%3AL%3As%3AL%3Ai%3AL%3As%3AL%3A&searchIn=0&oid=2&lang=en>

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cancer-diagnosis/HQ01306>

<http://childrensnyp.org/mschony/oncology-cope.html>

<http://www.youngparkinsons.org/blog/getting-where-from-diagnosis-to-acceptance>

[http://stress.lovetoknow.com/Traveling\\_is\\_a\\_Good\\_Method\\_to\\_Release\\_Stress](http://stress.lovetoknow.com/Traveling_is_a_Good_Method_to_Release_Stress)

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/cancer-diagnosis/HQ01306>

<https://www.workhealthlife.com/search.aspx?q=D%3AL%3Ai%3AL%3Aa%3AL%3Ag%3AL%3An%3AL%3Ao%3AL%3As%3AL%3Ai%3AL%3As%3AL%3A&searchIn=0&oid=2&lang=en>

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