

## Living with Chronic Illness: Using Stress Management Skills to Promote Physical and Psychological Well-Being

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If you have been diagnosed with a chronic illness, stress likely takes on a new meaning for you. While many people who are physically healthy learn to live with daily stressors, people living with chronic illnesses must be vigilant about managing both the daily and long-term stressors in their lives because they could be potentially life-threatening. Much has been written and discussed in the news recently about Elizabeth Edwards, the wife of Senator and Presidential candidate John Edwards, and her battle with cancer. Should they continue to campaign knowing all the stress that she will be under with the intense travel, numerous speeches, and prolonged absence from home, family, friends, and her doctors? Stress is a powerful thing. The impact of stress alone on the cancer may exacerbate her symptoms and ultimately shorten her life.

### Stress and Physical Well-Being

If not managed correctly, acute stressors may turn into chronic stressors, which have been shown to have a negative impact on physical well-being. Over time, stress can affect the risk of cardiovascular disease by increasing the chances of high blood pressure, abnormal heartbeat, problems with blood clotting, and hardening of the arteries. Stress may contribute to other health problems such as muscle and joint pain, stomach and intestinal problems, reproductive organs, asthma and other respiratory problems, skin problems, and the immune system.

Identifying both acute and chronic stressors is the first step in being able to manage them. As mentioned in the article “When is Stress Too Much to Handle?” in the February newsletter, it is critical to recognize the physical and psychological warning signs of stress in order to identify it and take action to manage it.

### How you Deal with Stress is Up to You

Stress affects people differently. Some people tend to bounce back from stressful events better than others. Some people may view a situation as highly stressful while others are not affected by it. There are several factors which vary from one individual to the next that may impact how you deal with stress. These include:

- Your inherited traits
- Your past experience with stress
- Your personality characteristics
- Your perception of stress
- Your coping strategies
- Your social support

Knowing your characteristics and tendencies will help you be better prepared to cope with many of the stressors associated with chronic illness.

### Find What Works for You

Everyone deals with stress in different ways. For Elizabeth Edwards, the conscious decision to keep living her life the way she was living it before her cancer returned may be a way for her to cope effectively with her illness. For those living with chronic illness, it is important to identify the current and potential stressors in your life and find healthy ways to manage them so that they have minimal impact on your physical health. What may work for one person may not work for another. For example, exercise or participating in sports may be stress relieving for some while others feel relaxed when reading a book or spending time with friends.

It is important to find what works best for you, but keep in mind that not all coping mechanisms are positive. Some people eat more or use alcohol or drugs to cope with stress and “take the edge off.” You certainly do not want to trade one stressor for another by employing the wrong technique. Also remember that some stress management techniques work best to cope with short-term or temporary stressors while others may be more suitable for long-term or chronic stressors such as chronic illness. For some chronic illnesses, high levels of activity may be contraindicated, so you may have to adopt new coping mechanisms such as muscle relaxation techniques to deal with stress.

When you understand your tendencies and how you deal with stress, you can make positive lifestyle choices and changes which will help you lower your overall stress level, find positive coping mechanisms, and recover from stress quickly in order to promote psychological and physical well-being.

In April’s Round Table Discussion with Dr. Beaty, we will be discussing positive and negative ways to manage the stress of chronic illness. Please contact Dr. Beaty for the date and time.

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