

Features

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Achieving wellness when you have a chronic illness

By Rebecca Cohen - Chronicle columnist

The art of getting well is a martial art, a gentle form of self-defense.

It emphasizes awareness and balance. Our genetic inheritance, our exposure to harmful environments, our social and economic conditions, our problems with work and relationships and the habits we picked up before we knew better can damage us if we don't take responsibility to minimize the damage and maximize our well-being. When life makes us sick, we can fight back with self-care. We can change the conditions that injure us and adapt to the things we cannot change.

The first step in gaining health is to believe that you can get better, not through willpower and following orders, but by improving the quality of your life. It's about not just slowing the progression of illness, not just coping, but truly improving, no matter how you're labeled, how long you've been sick or how many therapies you've tried. You can learn skills to take better care of yourself and have better relationships with others. However, it's important to remember that, while all of these skills sometimes lead to a "cure," more often they do not. What you do achieve, no matter what your condition, is a sense of well-being, feeling more fully alive with less disability and social limitation, increased energy, less distress and maybe fewer visits to the doctor.

We all have a right to grieve, to be angry and often to be a little scared about health problems. But the question is: What do we do with those feelings? When life makes us sick, we can fight back with self-care. We can use our anger as motivation to change harmful life situations like a stressful job or a family that continues to smoke despite our lung disease. We can use our fear of future complications as a reason to change unhealthy behaviors and attitudes rather than remaining stuck in our fear. We can allow our sadness to extend into feelings of compassion, and even love, for our bodies and our whole selves, rather than falling into depression.

Studies have shown that the presence of the following barriers to self-care can often prevent you from gaining wellness, despite your best intentions:

- Not valuing yourself and believing that it is selfish or "bad" to take the time and energy required to maintain health;
- Losing your hope and motivation to try because you lack self-confidence in your ability to help yourself or you believe that nothing will help you heal;
- Fearing getting well because change is scary and can be difficult;
- Having a negative attitude toward your body (e.g., the way it feels and looks) and letting it fall apart;
- Self-sabotaging your own efforts and success (it's important to be honest with yourself and try to understand what you gain from staying sick);
- Not receiving respect and assistance from health care professionals (recovery requires taking some control of your life and your care, so it's important to inform yourself and ask for what you need);
- Having too many demands and not enough help or support in your life.

If you have a chronic illness, the following six steps can help you overcome your barriers to self-care:

1. **Slow down and save some energy for your body and life.** Don't give every last ounce to work, worry or other demands.

2. **Change something in your life that is damaging.** No matter how small, any successful change builds self-confidence and makes the next change easier.

3. **Learn to find and ask for help.** Life is a cooperative effort, and none of us can do everything alone. Talk to someone else with your condition about resources.

4. **Value your body and your life.** Listen to your body and treat it with respect. Fill your life with reasons to live and with pleasure and love.

5. **Take responsibility for your life and your care, and be assertive.** Accept yourself the way you are, but don't give up on getting better.

6. **Educate yourself** about the kind of lifestyle changes you need to make and the latest research about complementary and medical therapies.

While these steps may sound intimidating, remember that we rarely need the whole program, and anything we do for ourselves is likely to pay dividends. The primary idea is to improve your quality of life, and you're probably doing many things right already. So it's really not as hard as it sounds. By taking care of yourself and by optimizing your health, you get to appreciate the gifts of life, not just endure the struggles. And, as you work toward achieving your own wellness, you may bring happiness and inspiration to someone else who needs guidance.