



NHS Fife Department of Psychology

Coping with sudden illness

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Coming to terms with illness can be very difficult, particularly when it is sudden. It can affect you in lots of different ways. While we can't really prepare for being faced with sudden illness, it might help to know that you're not alone in how you are feeling about it.

Understanding your illness

Some people find that they ask for lots of information when faced with illness suddenly. Others feel overwhelmed and find it difficult to take in any details. Understanding your illness can be an important step in helping you feel more in control. You might find the self help document, 'Preparing for a Hospital Appointment' useful in helping you feel prepared for appointments and in understanding things later. You could ask someone to help you find out more by being with you at these times.

Recognising the emotional impact

Many people experience difficult emotions when they or a loved one is suddenly ill. You might initially feel numb or in shock about what has happened, and find it difficult to know how to respond. Some people talk about it feeling like it's a bad dream and that they can't believe it is happening to them. You might struggle with feeling a loss of control. Feelings such as fear, sadness, anger and guilt are common. You might find it difficult to sleep and feel exhausted. These emotions are difficult and can be very intense, but at the same time, it's important to remember that they are normal, won't harm you and should ease with time.

Recovery

The process of recovering from illness can be slow. It takes time to recover from the physical effects of illness, and adaptations that may be needed for any long term

effects. Sudden illness can impact your wellbeing as a whole, and you might find it difficult or frustrating that you are limited during this time. It's important to try to take time to look after yourself, both physically and emotionally. You might find it helpful to plan to do things you enjoy and are important to you, such as meeting a friend or watch a movie. The stress of recovering from illness is challenging and can make it hard for you to focus on these things. For more ideas on how to manage stress, there is a section under the mental health tab on moodcafé.

Setting goals and pacing

As you recover from illness, you might find that you're not able to do as much as usual. This can feel frustrating, and you might have thoughts about how you 'should' be doing more or worries about what others think about you doing less. This is normal, but can mean that you push yourself to do more and find that you are exhausted or in pain for days afterwards. Try to notice when this happens and see if you can adjust your goals to make them more realistic and achievable. Sometimes you may feel that the tasks needed for recovery just aren't worth it as progress is slow. Again, setting realistic goals and taking things a day at a time can help. One way you could do this is by breaking tasks down into smaller chunks and completing them over a longer period, taking rests in between. You could also try adjusting your goals to make them more realistic for you as you recover from your illness. Pacing in these ways can help you to do more in the longer term and look after yourself as you recover from your illness. There is more information about this in the 'Pacing' leaflet under Self Help Documents.

Talking about your experience

Emotional recovery from illness can take as long, if not longer, than physical recovery. The events that have happened in the course of sudden illness can be traumatic. It can feel difficult to think about what has happened and how you feel about it. However, this can be an important part in helping you to move on and live your life. Most people find it

helpful to share what's happened to them to help them make sense of their experiences. This might be with family and friends, or a support group of people who have had similar experiences. Talking things through in this way can be an important part of your recovery.

Adjustment and acceptance

Coping with the effects of physical illness can be an ongoing process. Sudden illness can lead to long term health problems or conditions that give you more challenges. The self help leaflets, 'Coping with long term physical health conditions' and 'Introduction to Acceptance & Commitment Therapy' may be helpful. It can take time to process this and find ways to adjust. Over time, you might find that living with illness has given you a sense of what is really important to you in life. You can use this to help you take control of your life back from your illness and to accept what has happened, so that you can live your life more fully.

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