



# Coping with Chronic Illness

by Debra A. Crockett, MSW, LSW

Have you or a loved one ever faced any of the following: heart disease, diabetes, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, stroke, autoimmune disease, or cancer? This represents a partial list of the many chronic, debilitating illnesses that affect people on a daily basis. According to the Center for Disease Control, “chronic diseases are non-communicable illnesses that are prolonged in duration, do not resolve spontaneously, and are rarely cured completely. They are the leading cause of death and disability in the United States. They cause 7 out of 10 deaths each year and are among the most preventable and treatable of all health problems.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Challenges

Debilitating. Frustrating. Isolated. Sad. Painful. These are a few of the many words chronic illness sufferers use to describe their plight. They may struggle with the activities of daily living that others take for granted. Chronic illness sufferers may face difficulty performing household tasks and caring for their families. Debilitating fatigue and chronic pain are often factors that may impact full-time employment. Because of physical limitations, there may be financial and relational strain as well. As a result, it’s not surprising that many suffering with chronic illness also suffer with mental health issues like anxiety and depression.

Research from the National Institute of Mental Health reflects that depression is common among those who are diagnosed with chronic health conditions, and illness-related stress can trigger symptoms of depression. Further, people with depression and another medical condition tend to have more difficulty adapting to their medical condition.<sup>2</sup>

I am acutely aware of the challenges facing persons diagnosed with a chronic illness, because in 1998, I was diagnosed with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), and in 2013, lupus nephritis (kidney inflammation caused by SLE). SLE is an autoimmune disorder in which the immune system attacks its own tissues, causing widespread inflammation and tissue damage in the affected organs. It can affect the joints, skin, brain, lungs, kidneys, and blood vessels. Lupus has affected my joints, as well as my kidneys, hence the lupus nephritis diagnosis in 2013. One of the unpleasant by-products has been the chronic joint pain and fatigue.

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## How to Cope

In coping with my SLE diagnosis, 2 Corinthians 12:9 comes to mind: "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." The Lord has been faithful to see me through 23 years of coping with a chronic illness, at times in pain and suffering.

Here are a few recommendations in coping with chronic illness:

1. **Draw near to God in the midst of your chronic illness.** Allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you during those times when you must rest. Speak healing Scriptures over your life.
2. **Learn to manage your stress.** I found that my most difficult bouts with illness occurred during very stressful times.
3. **Eat a healthy diet.** I managed my symptoms much better when I ate a healthy diet loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables, poultry, and fish, and I avoided sugar.
4. **Gentle exercise,** including walking and stretching, with fresh air are beneficial.
5. **Develop community for support.** You need a good support system to help you during times of illness.
6. **Seek professional help** if you find difficulty coping with the emotional strain of chronic illness.

Remember that His grace is sufficient for you. The present-tense of "is sufficient" indicates that there is a constant, moment-by-moment availability of divine grace to meet you in your time of need. You will have divine grace to endure the physical, emotional, and financial hardships of chronic illness. ■

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mental Health and Chronic Disease CDC Fact Sheet. CDC website: <https://www.cdc.gov/workplacehealthpromotion/tools-resources/pdfs/issue-brief-no-2-mental-health-and-chronic-disease.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> "Chronic Illness and Mental Health: Recognizing and Treating Depression." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health. NIH Publication No. 21-MH-8015 Revised 2021. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/health/publications/chronic-illness-mental-health>



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