

HOW TO SUPPORT A PARTNER WITH CHRONIC ILLNESS

WHAT IS CHRONIC ILLNESS?

An illness is chronic when it is long lasting (typically a year or more) and there may or may not be an established cure for it. Some examples include: autoimmune diseases, long COVID, Lyme, IBS, chronic pain, and many more. These illnesses can affect people's lives in countless ways, and often lead to exacerbated stress, mental health conditions, and relationship conflict.

Chronic illness can present in many different forms, and is not always visible to those around you. However, that doesn't make the experience any less real, and people with chronic illness often suffer in silence. It's important to be there as a partner to support someone who is suffering with chronic illness, without burning yourself out in the process. When a person with chronic illness feels supported, and not "like a burden," they can better withstand the impacts of the disease, and reduce their own feelings of shame, self-blame, and anxiety.

WAYS TO SUPPORT PARTNER EXPERIENCING A HEALTH FLARE:

1. **Validate their experience**

Recognizing and naming the physical and emotional pain that someone is experiencing, without judgment or blame. Whether or not you understand it, their experience is valid (i.e. "I can imagine how hard this is" or "that must be so painful.")

2. **Show your care in small ways**

Your partner just wants to know you are there for them, and even small gestures can mean so much. Talk with your partner about how they would like to spend time together in low energy ways, such as watching TV together, or short walks.

3. **Be patient and flexible**

People with chronic illness are trying their best, and that might look different depending on the day, or even the time of day. Try not to take it personally, and practice radical acceptance of the reality of how this may impact you and your family.

4. **Show curiosity without assuming**

Ask just a few questions, with a curious and compassionate stance, without judgment. Learn more about what their experience is like, and check in on how they are feeling regularly.

5. **Take care of your own needs!**

Last but not least, it is extremely important for you to practice your own self-care, and put your "oxygen mask" on first. It can be tempting, yet harmful to sacrifice yourself at the expense of your loved ones.

WHAT NOT TO SAY!

- "You should just try to push through!"
- "But you don't look sick?"
- "Be grateful that it isn't worse."

WHAT NOT TO DO!

- Self-abandonment of your own needs
- Think you're responsible for their healing
- Doubt their lived experiences