

## Chronic Illness & Your Mental Health

Living with chronic physical illness can affect our mental health more than we often consider. If we take a step back, we can see a multitude of heightened emotions and stressors associated with physical disease.

- **Grief and shock** brought on by your initial diagnosis.
- **Anger, frustration and disappointment** that might accompany changes in your daily activities, lifestyle and independence.
- **Invalidation and jealousy** that might flare around friends and family members who don't have similar limitations.
- **Fear and sadness** about survival, your family, your body, your physical appearance.

While these feelings are normal, they take a significant toll on our mental well-being. And it is possible — as it always is — to develop a mental health condition under these circumstances. Now, a mental health condition isn't the result of one thing. Just because you have chronic, physical illness doesn't mean you're "destined" to have mental illness, and some people with chronic illness might never experience mental illness.

Research suggests multiple, linking causes when it comes to mental health conditions. Genetics, environment and lifestyle influence whether someone develops mental illness. A stressful job or home life makes some people more susceptible, as do traumatic life events. Biochemical processes and circuits and basic brain structure may play a role, too.

Trying to tell the difference between what "expected behaviors" are and what might be the signs of a mental illness isn't always easy. There's no test. We just need to be mindful of our thoughts and behaviors.

### Potential Warning Signs

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for more than two weeks
- Trying to harm or end one's life or making plans to do so
- Severe, out-of-control, risk-taking behavior that causes harm to self or others
- Sudden overwhelming fear for no reason, sometimes with a racing heart, physical discomfort or difficulty breathing
- Significant weight loss or gain
- Seeing, hearing or believing things that aren't real \*
- Excessive use of alcohol or drugs
- Drastic changes in mood, behavior, personality or sleeping habits
- Extreme difficulty concentrating or staying still
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities

*\* Various communities and backgrounds might view this sign differently based on their beliefs and experiences. Some people within these communities and cultures may not interpret hearing voices as unusual.*

You might consider some of these signs and symptoms just a normal part of your life as a human being battling chronic illness — that's understandable. Weight loss, worrying, sleeping a lot? That might sound like another Tuesday. However, it could also indicate something more serious. Please do not dismiss these signs as fringe symptoms of your physical illness.

Consider mentioning anything distressing you might notice at your next appointment with your primary care doctor. Or **make an appointment** with a psychiatrist, psychologist or other mental health professional if you're sure you need emotional support. It might also be worthwhile to find someone who is familiar with your experiences and life story — perhaps they can provide a valuable perspective on your overall mood.

## You Are Not Alone

If mental illness becomes part of your story, please know that NAMI, and the entire mental health community, is here for you. We provide —

- [explanations](#) of mental illness
- therapy & medication [details](#)
- mental health education [classes](#)
- resources and advice on next steps from [real people](#)
- [support groups](#)

Most importantly, there is likely a local NAMI in your area (or close by) so you can connect with people nearby. Please visit [NAMI.org/findNAMI](https://www.nami.org/findNAMI) to start your search and NAMI.org to find everything listed above.

Forging a life with a chronic and mental illness is challenging. As you begin to formulate a plan for living well, it's common (and normal) to feel overwhelmed as you make sense of it all. But it's important to know that you're not alone — and that help is just around the corner.