

Psychosocial aspects of chronic illness

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Objective

- At the end of the lecture, the students should be able to describe the psychosocial aspects of chronic illness

Introduction

- Think of the last time you were physically unwell or
- experienced physical pain:
- How did this affect you?
- What impact did it have on people around you?
 - – Family
 - – Friends
 - – classmates
- How did it impact on how you interacted with other people?

- Now imagine that this illness didn't go away, and that you were left with this experience in the long term:
- How do you think this would effect you?
- What impact might this have on people around you?
 - Family
 - Friends
 - classmates
- How might it impact on relationships between yourself and others?

Chronic illness

- The term “chronic illness(es)” is used when referring to or closely associated with individuals or families living with one or more medical conditions.
- Chronic diseases are long-term health conditions that threaten wellbeing and function in an episodic, continuous, or progressive way over many years of life

- Chronic diseases endure over time and have the potential to profoundly impact on people's day-to-day lives and experience
- Chronic illnesses have always been a great burden not only to those living with them but also to their societies and cultures, taking a tremendous toll on welfare, economic productivity, social structures, and achievements.

- Individuals with chronic illnesses have historically sought varied healers and healing institutions in their communities to alleviate suffering.
- Not only have chronic diseases emerged as leading causes of death; they also represent enormous and growing causes of impairment and disability (WHO, 2004)

- Living with a chronic health problem makes the affected individual(s) to engage in the process of adjusting to changes brought about by the illness.
- Impact of diagnosis and adjustment depends on a number of factors:
 - Psychological factors
 - Biological factors
 - Illness experience
 - Social factors

- These factors can be considered in terms of:
 - age
 - gender
 - race
 - coping styles
 - past experiences
 - social support
 - family support
 - socioeconomic status
 - culture

Psychological impact may be brought by the following:

- Symptoms may be distressing and disabling
- Unpredictable symptoms can be more difficult to adjust to
- No clear diagnosis can make adjustment more challenging
- Patients may be coping with significant uncertainty about what is happening with their body
- Can lead to increased stress and anxiety and worry which can exacerbate physical symptoms
- May change behaviours, reduce activities

Psychological adjustment tasks include:

- Learning to deal with and make sense of uncomfortable or distressing symptoms
- Learning to cope with new healthcare environments and procedures
- Coping with impact of symptoms on own physical and emotional health, family roles, work, finances etc..
- Grieving for the loss of previous health

Adjustment tasks following diagnosis

- Beginning process of acceptance of diagnosis
- Beginning to address self-management needs. For example
 - Looking for up to date knowledge on symptoms & treatment options
 - Monitoring and managing symptoms

- Engagement in activities to promote health
- Manage impact of symptoms on physical health, mental health and relationships
- Establishing and maintaining relationships with healthcare providers
- In the face of uncertainty, there is need to develop flexibility about future goals

Individual differences in coping

- Coping efforts may be aimed at approaching or avoiding the demands of chronic illness
- Coping style can affect how people engage with the tasks of self-management
 - Approach oriented coping strategies
 - information seeking, problem solving, seeking support, actively attempting to identify benefit in an experience, creating outlets for emotional expression

- Avoidance orientated coping strategies
 - denial, suppression, disengagement, wishful thinking
- Different strategies may be helpful at different times
- Flexibility in coping strategy may be most important

Psychological impact

- Meaning of living with chronic illness longer term becomes more apparent
 - Increased awareness of body vulnerability - chronic illness can chip away at perceptions of control over body integrity
 - Chronic health problems can impact on a persons ability to engage in activities that bring a sense of meaning and purpose to life – it can threaten life goals
 - Involvement in medical treatment may not always lead to control over the outcome

- An individual can experience difficult thoughts and feelings
- There may be a sense of personal failure, Or anger that their body is letting them down
- Feelings of helplessness
- Catastrophising, negative thoughts (may be linked to anxiety and depression)
- Withdrawal from activities, or loss of previously valued activities

Social factors: social resources, support, interpersonal relationships

- Most adaptive tasks of chronic disease management require help from others
- Social support affects outcomes in several physiological, emotional and cognitive pathways.

- They help people use effective coping strategies by offering a better understanding of the problem and increasing motivation to take action
- They can encourage positive health behaviours and can diminish physiological reactivity to stress
- Studies reveal the direct and buffering effects of support on depressive symptoms

- Its also important to note that:
 - Social support can erode over time
 - Support can become burdensome to others or demands of recovery may fail to match support providers expectations
 - Just as close relationships can be supportive and caring – they can be characterized by misunderstanding, disapproval, antagonism

- Depressive feelings may elicit feelings of irritation and resentment in the partner, leading to increased anger and reduced support provision
- This can lead to increase depressive symptoms for the patient.

- In conclusion, it is important we...
 - Acknowledge the stress caused by physical health conditions
 - Seek help for our physical and psychological health
 - Validate experience
 - Have honest conversations