



## Coping with Chronic Health Conditions

As a society we have made tremendous gains in preventing, identifying and treating a host of ailments and illnesses. Many of these gains have been in addressing acute conditions or disorders that may be successfully treated, returning the individual to their prior level of health. There is another category of health concerns that tend to come on more slowly, have a fluctuating course and last a long time. These chronic health conditions may arise as a result of an acute illness or injury, or may even arise as a result of the treatment for an acute condition. A chronic condition may cause few problems or may significantly disrupt a person's work, social, family and personal functioning. In many cases chronic conditions cannot be cured; rather the focus is on managing symptoms and impairments and maximizing quality of life. Examples of chronic conditions are diabetes, arthritis, depression, congestive heart failure, hepatitis, chronic pain and asthma.

Chronic health conditions truly challenge our capacity for resilience. It is very difficult to truly 'bounce back' and we may find that we need to reconsider our sense of values and identity and discover new ways of achieving worth, handling problems and managing our emotions and relationships. Traditional medicine may well be useful in addressing and alleviating symptoms, however chronic health conditions require a different approach and relationship between the person and his or her health care provider. This is referred to as *Chronic Disease Management (CDM)*, and has been embraced by most health care systems. Although different conditions will have different emphases, there are several main components that are often found in this approach:

- **Education:** Individuals with chronic conditions need to become experts on their own health. This means accessing current and accurate information about their condition and treatment options as well as monitoring their ongoing health status. What is the course of symptom intensity or change? Are there particular triggers that bring on, or worsen, symptoms? What kinds of things help reduce or relieve symptoms? Are there other conditions or circumstances that interact with the condition or its treatment?
- **Partnership:** As their own experts on their health, persons with chronic conditions need to actively collaborate with the health care system on their care. This means using medical visits to address specific acute issues when they arise while maintaining contact for checkups or treatment on a mutually agreed on basis. It means bringing specific questions, new information or concerns to appointments and writing down or recording medical sessions. It means asking about the scientific evidence for, and the health professional's experience with, various treatment options as well as probable outcome and potential complications. It means making joint decisions about intervention and management as well as shared accountability for follow through.
- **Self-management:** As informed experts collaborating with health care providers, persons with chronic conditions also benefit from self-management. This includes managing specific aspects of their condition, such as pain, fatigue and medication, as well as using more general strategies to maintain and promote their general health such as diet, exercise and stress reduction. It may involve participation in community self-help programs or engaging friends or family members to assist with care and independence. This approach



## resiliency builder

helps people develop skills to maintain and improve their own well-being and gain greater autonomy and confidence in dealing with the physical and emotional challenges of a chronic condition.

Living with a chronic condition can be very challenging as they can become all consuming. We may become the condition, as opposed to being a person with a condition. This can strip us of our identity and sense of purpose. Ram Dass, a psychologist and spiritual teacher, suffered a serious stroke. He wrote of his experiences and slow rehabilitation as follows:

*“ It is important to expect nothing, to take every experience, including the negative ones, as merely steps on the path, and to proceed.”*