

Complex Chronic Illness Support Members Meeting Resource



How to manage the fear of change

Change is a natural part of the human experience and we can experience a wide array of emotions when we experience change. Today we will touch on the fear of change and how it can manifest and impact upon our health, as our lives are changed by developing a complex chronic illness.

What is change

The essence of change is an alteration or difference in a situation or in life. For most of us the development of our complex chronic illness is a major life change which in turn causes stress.

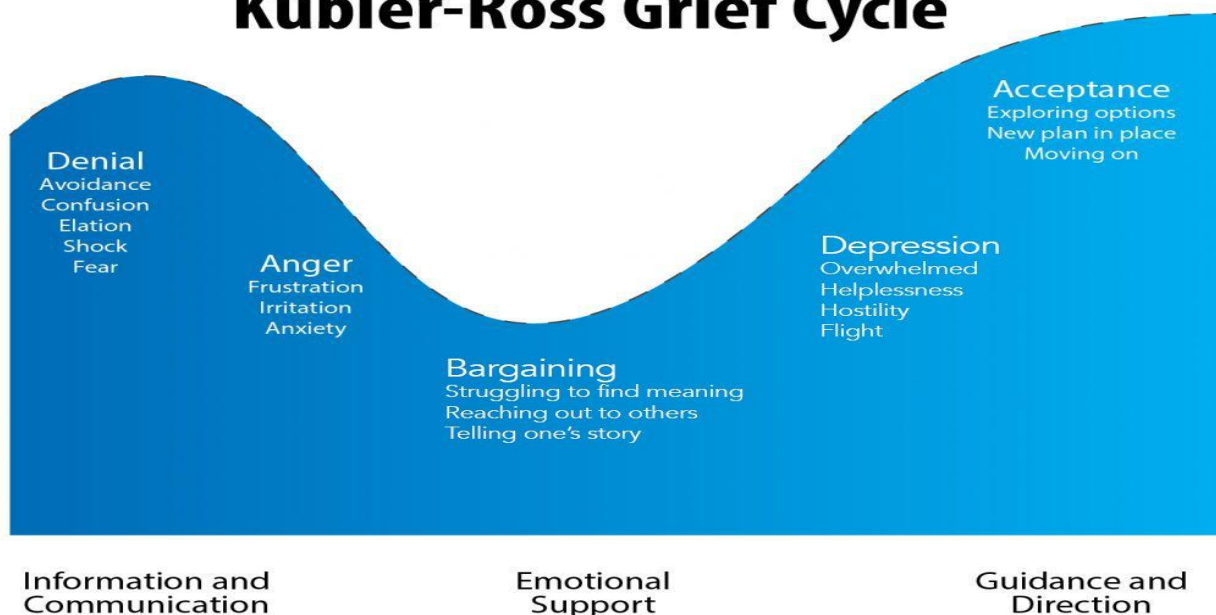
Chronic Illness is one of leading causes of stress in our society, along with divorce/relationship breakdown, death of a loved one, loss of a job, increased financial obligations, getting married, moving to a new home and traumatic events.



https://batemanhomecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/emotional_rollercoaster-e1477433017308.jpg

To help understand some of these life events Elizabeth Kubler-Ross in 1969 developed the Grief Cycle and this has been successfully used to help enable people to understand the process that grieving/loss/change may follow. Grief, shock, sadness, and relief are often felt when we first receive the diagnosis. After that we can move through the stages of denial, confusion, and avoidance. Then we often find anger, anxiety and frustration. After that we may experience bargaining, depression and finally acceptance. This is not usually linear journey, but a cycle.

Kübler-Ross Grief Cycle



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Why do we fear change

We fear change because it creates uncertainty in our lives, we cannot anticipate what will happen, we cannot predict the outcome due to this change. When we develop a chronic illness many life stressors are also activated – worry over finances, stress on our relationships, we may lose our job, may need to move from our home, and we also suffer the loss of our future plans. Chronic illness creates a great deal of additional stressor on top of that of becoming physically unwell.

Our brains are hard wired for certainty, for regularity and prediction so when we experience change, we automatically fear the worst and look for a negative outcome. This is because our amygdala perceives change as a threat to self. The limbic system then activates the fight, flight or freeze response within our bodies and in a nano second, we are flooded with chemicals to enable our reaction to the danger – rapid heartbeat, breathing speeds up, muscles tense up etc. If you stay in this stressed state too long it can be hard on the brain and the body.

'Stuck' in fear and grief cycle

There can be times when we can get 'stuck' in the grief cycle and find ourselves cycling between the stages, and not moving towards acceptance. The reasons for this will be unique to each person but many believe that it is due to a maladaptive stress response (very sensitive to stress) caused by the chronic illness itself. This causes people to be triggered into the fight, flight and freeze response by the smallest of annoyance, and stay 'stuck' in that state. Our bodies are not designed to be in this heightened state for long periods so many systems like the adrenal system can become fatigued.

It is 'normal' to fear change, it is part of being a human, and we cannot stop the stress response, it has helped humans evolve, you are not to blame for how your body and mind is responding.

How can we manage fear

There are many ways that we can help to reduce the fear of change that we are experiencing and to shift from this fight, flight and freeze response and 'stuck' state towards being in a healing state.

1. Explore the information

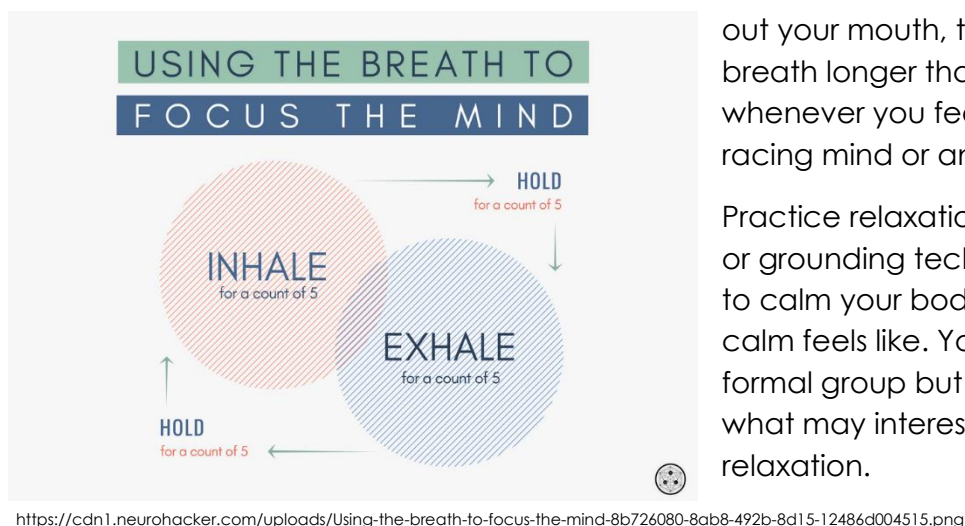


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Information is power and the more we can learn about the conditions which we find ourselves living with, the more we will understand what is happening. Uncertainty can fuel our fears, so reading a book like Dr Vallings CFS/ ME Symptoms, Diagnosis and Management or visiting a trusted website like CFS & Fibromyalgia Self-Help, can enable us to reduce our fears and create more certainty. Certainty soothes the brain, the information then allows us to recognise the new symptoms are in fact part of the over all condition and not a new concern. Joining groups like CCIS and finding a community of people who are experiencing similar changes can also help to calm the stress response.

2. Breath

The most direct way to access and calm our fight, flight & freeze response is through deep breathing. So, please take a moment and take three deep breaths into your belly and slowly



out your mouth, try to make your 'out' breath longer than the 'in' breath. Do this whenever you feel a tightening in the gut, a racing mind or any of your known stress signs.

Practice relaxation, mindfulness, meditation, or grounding techniques each day to help to calm your body and to teach it what calm feels like. You do not have to join any formal group but be curious and find out what may interest you in this area of relaxation.

3. Lean into accepting what is

Our fears often hinder us from trying new things as we fear that we will fail at this as well. But by recognising that failure is a universal part of life and that change is a constant, we can begin to lean into accepting our new situation and the changes that it creates. We may find that new doors open when old ones close and that our chronic illness may not be as limiting as first thought.

Choosing to be open to change and accepting of what is happening in a positive way can go a long way to calming our brains and relaxing our bodies so they move towards a healing state.

4. Gain control of your symptoms

Use the information you have gathered to understand your symptoms - tools like pacing, sleep hygiene and restorative movement help you to manage your energy levels better so that you do not overextend your energy envelop.

You may like to try a programme like the Towards Wellness Programme or the Optimum Health Clinic's online 90 Day Programme etc which give you a more focused attention on management of the condition.

Simply keeping a diary can be a very effective way of learning about your energy patterns which can give you information about ways to manage it better.

When we are doing something positive to help ourselves, we begin to feel more in control of the situation and less at the mercy of the illness. This helps to reduce anxiety and gives us something positive to focus on, it moves our brains into an active state rather than a passive one.

5. Let it go

Often, we hold on to ideas of ourselves and what we thought our lives would be like, which can create a lot of blame. The more we can let go of these strongly held ideas the better. We can start our lives again in any moment and at any time, a new chapter and fresh start. Any new goals or aspirations that we may decide to hold in future, try to 'hold them lightly' and make them something you would 'like to' have, not a 'must' have.

Language can be very helpful with this, we can start by reducing 'should', 'have to', 'must' and replacing it with 'would like to', 'if I choose to', 'eventually.'

6. Try a little self-compassion

The practice of self-compassion is an effective way to enable self-care and a greater care for others. It enables us to understand our suffering and learn how to live with it in a kind way. Try speaking to yourself as you would to best friend, don't beat yourself up, it's not helpful.



What are some tools

- ✚ CFS and Fibromyalgia Self Help website has a vast amount of free information and activities <http://www.cfselfhelp.org/>
- ✚ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome M.E. Symptoms, Diagnosis and Management written by Dr Rosamund Vallings has been edited and republished this year. Ask your Field Officer for a copy from the library or visit www.calicopublishing.co.nz
- ✚ Try one of the many free online tools for mindfulness and meditation like Insite Timer; <https://insighttimer.com/> or Tara Brach; <https://www.tarabrach.com/guided-meditations/>
- ✚ In you are interested in grounding you could try these activities from Living Well; <https://www.livingwell.org.au/well-being/mental-health/grounding-exercises/>
- ✚ Maybe Emotional Freedom technique if of interest try starting with Jessica Ortner; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pAcIBdj20ZU>
- ✚ To work on acceptance, you may like to speak with a trained Counsellor. In the Eastern and Western Bay, we have free BTI Student counsellor's available, so please make a booking with them. For other areas remember that your GP can get you access to free counselling through the local DHB, please speak with your GP about this.
- ✚ You maybe interested in reading further on self-acceptance from this Positive Psychology article; <https://positivepsychology.com/self-acceptance/>
- ✚ If you are interested in joining our award winning Towards Wellness programme please express your interest via this link; [Expression of interest](#)
- ✚ For the Optimum Health clinic visit; <https://www.theoptimumhealthclinic.com/90-day-programme/>
- ✚ To learn more about having an adaptive mind; <https://www.psychologytoday.com/nz/blog/the-adaptive-mind/201809/how-overcome-the-fear-change>
- ✚ For self-compassion a good place to start is with Dr Kristin Neff who has worked as a researcher and practitioner in the area for many years; <https://self-compassion.org/> or listen to her 19 minute Tedx Talk; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lvfZBUSplr4>

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