Coping With Kidney Failure

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Coping with End Stage Renal Disease

By Eileen Boyte, MSW

Research shows that 44 percent of newly diagnosed End Stage Renal Disease (ESRD) patients are affected by depression (Prescott, 2006). Losing your kidney function and becoming dependant on dialysis, a life sustaining treatment, can be a difficult diagnosis for many patients to accept. It is important to know that all the emotions you are experiencing are completely normal. Feelings of grief and loss are not uncommon. The loss of one's health can lead to feelings of denial, anger and depression. In order to reach the point of acceptance of this diagnosis, many patients must first cycle through these feelings and emotions. Understand that this process is different for all people. Some patients may experience denial more deeply while others feel anger or depression. Accepting that you are struggling with your ESRD diagnosis is the first step in being able to learn how to cope well with the changes you are experiencing in your life as a result of the disease. You are not alone. There is support and hope for people with ESRD to live happy, productive, and healthy lives.

If you find yourself feeling depressed following your ESRD diagnosis, there are some simple steps you can take to get back on track. Don’t be ashamed of your feelings; remember these feelings are completely normal. Try to set any shame associated with depression and mental health aside. Your mental and physical well-being are of the most importance as you move into this new part of your life as an ESRD patient. Each dialysis facility has a social worker who is available to meet with you to discuss these concerns. Your social worker will be able to provide you with local resources and referrals to things such as counseling and support groups. Each patient’s individual needs and beliefs are taken into consideration when making these referrals. Additionally, patients can turn to family and friends or religious and spiritual leaders for added guidance and support. Coping with ESRD is an individualized process and will require soul-searching on your part to determine what you believe and feel will be helpful in addressing your personal concerns and struggles.
Don't give up. Chances are that you have been experiencing loss of energy in addition to the emotional stress you have been experiencing. Keep in mind that adjusting to dialysis will be a physical process as well as an emotional process. The more treatment you receive, the better you will begin to feel. As your blood is cleaned by the dialysis and the toxins are removed, you should start to feel some of your energy coming back. Allow your body to go through this healing and be patient with the process. Once you start to regain some strength and energy, pick up some of the activities that you love. Being involved in hobbies or activities can be a very important part of coping with ESRD. You do not have to give up the things you love simply because you have been diagnosed with ESRD. Many patients want to return to work. Through the use of vocational rehabilitation resources, this goal can be accomplished. Start off simple and slow. Always talk with your doctor if your hobbies or job are hard or physically demanding and together find a level that is right and comfortable for your health and physical capabilities.

Don't take a back seat to your health. Remember that you are the most important member of your treatment. The more involved and proactive you can be in your treatment, the better your results will be. Although you may be experiencing feelings of lost control over your life and your health, remember that there are many things that you can do to regain some of that control. Keep in mind that your health is physical, mental and emotional. All parts of your health must be given the proper care and attention in order for you to live the best life possible. Coping with ESRD is not a concrete process. There are no rules set in stone as to how one should go about coping with the adjustment. Acknowledge that you may need help, support or additional resources. Explore options that you are comfortable with, yet be open minded to options that you may not have considered before. If something doesn't seem to be working, then try something else. Remember that support and resources are available, but you must take the first steps forward in seeking and accepting that support.

Reference:
Managing mental illness in the dialysis treatment environment: A team approach
MEGAN PRESCOTT, MSW, December 2006 • Nephrology News & Issues

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