

Living well with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis

A guide to psychological wellbeing



Introduction

It can be difficult to know how to react, when you are diagnosed with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. You might feel shock or disbelief at what your doctors are telling you. It might not even feel real, finding out that you have a life-long medical condition. But you might also feel relieved to finally have answers, even if you are worried about what this diagnosis will mean for your future.

In the weeks and months following diagnosis, people often struggle with feelings of anger, frustration, despair and loss. These emotions are completely normal, although knowing this isn't always helpful when your life is changing around you.

But being diagnosed with a chronic illness, or having symptoms return after a period of relative good health, does have an impact on our mental wellbeing. Our self-esteem, confidence and sense of worth can all be affected by upsetting physical symptoms. Feelings of stress and isolation can even develop into anxiety and depression, which are both common in people with Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. For some people, this emotional experience can be more difficult to manage than the illness itself.

It is important to let yourself experience uncomfortable emotions as they emerge and recognise that you are allowed to have them. This helps to reduce the guilt or responsibility you may be carrying for feeling the way that you do. It won't necessarily alleviate your distressing emotions, but being patient with yourself and what you are going through is part of the road to feeling better.



COPE strategy

A problem-solving strategy can help you manage your worries. Health professionals have developed a strategy that is simple and straight-forward to use: COPE

C for Creativity **O for Optimism** **P for Planning** **E for Expert Information**

First, you need to identify a central issue in your life. This can be tricky when all of your problems may feel interconnected, but try to choose one that you can simplify and understand deeply. Make sure it is one you can work on that will make a significant and positive difference to your life.

Then you can apply the key principles of the COPE strategy:

- 1. Creativity** – Look for different pathways you can take to tackle your specific problem and then choose the one that you think is most likely to work for you.
- 2. Optimism** – If you believe that you have a shot at succeeding, you'll do your best to make it happen! On the other hand, if you think from the start that your plan is hopeless and won't work, you'll easily become discouraged. Be realistic but optimistic.
- 3. Planning** – Break down your pathway into manageable little chunks. Have a think about the different ways you can approach them and their advantages and disadvantages. Rather than focusing on a one-stop solution, be ready to tweak parts of your plan as you go along when you run into obstacles.
- 4. Expert Information** – You might not know exactly how to define your problem or how to achieve your plan. Don't be afraid to reach out to people who can work with you, such as your GP, specialist, nurse, psychologist, social worker or other experts in the community. You can decide who can give you the best advice and support.

When you are overwhelmed, it can be difficult to sit down and think through all of the things that are worrying you. But taking the time to use COPE, or any other strategy, can help you to manage your uncomfortable emotions by acting on some of the reasons behind them.

Expert Tips

Simon Knowles PhD MAPS, Senior Lecturer & Clinical Psychologist, Swinburne University of Technology:

- Stress management is essential - engage in activities that allow you to relax (e.g., Read a book, go for a walk, listen to relaxing audio, use relaxation apps).
- Be physically active, but adapt the amount of exercise depending on your physical health.
- Spend time with those who you value .
- Getting good quality sleep is essential - identify and engage in good sleep hygiene habits.
- Set realistic goals for yourself that are consistent with your values.
- Explore activities that take account of your illness but still allow you to engage in your social activities and interests.
- Develop a support team with whom you can rely on to talk to (and work with you) to meet the challenges (and opportunities) that come with living with IBD.
- Talk to members of your support team when you need advice or help.



Expert Tips

Antonina Mikocka-Walus, MA(Psych), PhD, MAPS, Associate Professor in Health Psychology, Deakin University:

- Make sure your IBD is under control - this is the biggest factor in your mental health. No inflammation usually means better wellbeing.
- Sleep well - it is important to get at least 7 – 9 hours of sleep.
- Move - physical activity (even a gentle walk) improves overall wellbeing.
- Rest and play - schedule regular pleasant activities, spend some time in the great outdoors, follow a relaxation practice such as mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing.
- Meet with family and friends and speak to someone (a family member, friend, your doctor, member of your support group) when life becomes too hard.
- Seek support from a health psychologist to learn new ways of dealing with IBD.
- Eat well - have a balanced diet and eat what you can tolerate. If you struggle with your diet, speak with a dietician who understands IBD.





Crohn's & Colitis Australia

**For more tips and information on living well with IBD,
visit Crohn's & Colitis Hub:**

www.crohnsandcolitishub.com.au

**The information in this toolkit is general.
For expert, personalised guidance, please speak to your healthcare professional.**