Coping With Your COPD Diagnosis

by ERIC PATTERSON

Moving Forward After Receiving a COPD Diagnosis

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is, as its name suggests, a chronic medical condition that takes work to effectively deal with and manage. As soon as the doctor says “COPD,” you begin the process of coping with your diagnosis.

Counselor Eric's Advice for Coping

There is both positive and negative coping after news like this. With positive coping, you will experience a level of comfort and understanding with your diagnosis. Your daily activities and routines will not change much. Your relationships will remain as satisfying as they were previously, and your mental health will stay strong. You will live a life that is only slightly impacted by your COPD diagnosis.

The risk is with negative coping, though. With negative coping, many facets of your life will falter. You will struggle to concentrate at work. You will be more irritable at home, creating rifts in your relationships. Your typical routines and rituals will give way to inactivity as depression and anxiety begin to take hold in your life.

Obviously, positive coping is the path to take. The trouble is that positive coping after a COPD diagnosis doesn't “just happen,” because the natural response after a chronic diagnosis is to slide to the negative end of the spectrum. Perhaps there are some fortunate enough to come through COPD smoothly and effortlessly, but the majority of people need a more concerted attack plan. Here’s yours.

Get Rid of Stress

Your ability to cope with a new event centers on decreasing the overall stress in your life. Subtracting the COPD is not a possibility, though — once the diagnosis is part of your life, there is no going back. With this being true, spending time, energy, and other limited resources trying to “undo” your COPD will only lead to frustration and disappointment. Instead, work towards identifying and changing what you do have control over.

Work on getting rid of stress by:

- **Avoiding self-medication.** It is a dangerous habit to begin at any point, but especially following a health diagnosis. Self-medication typically begins at a manageable level but quickly builds into a separate problem. It will negatively impact many aspects of your life in direct ways.
- **Removing negative people from your life.** If you cannot totally remove them from your life, think of ways to reduce their involvement or the power you allow them to have over you and your stress levels.
- **Avoiding negative situations.** What situations add stress to your life? Don't get discouraged if it feels like you have to give up a lot; COPD requires change for everyone.

If you only focus on removing the negatives, you will be left in a state of neutrality where you experience neither

highs nor lows. This is a bland state and one to avoid. Once you have cleared out the dead weight, bring in some positives. Here's how:

- **Improve your physical health.** Investigate ways your diet, exercise routine and sleep can be improved. These areas are simple but add so much to your health and overall well-being.

Next page: more ways to add positives into your life, and Russell's journey to acceptance.

Get Rid of Stress

- **Work on relationships.** Your task is finding the people who improve the quality of your life. If they are already present in your life, find ways to spend more time together. Seek out clubs or groups involved with issues or causes you are interested in pursuing. Establish relationships with friends and family, online and in person, to achieve well-rounded success.
- **Strengthen spiritual health.** Medical conditions force you to assess your own mortality, and strengthening your spiritual health may be useful for you. Whether you decide to attend a church or something decidedly nontraditional, there is much to gain from exploring and expanding your spiritual health.
- **Focus on mental health.** Chronic medical conditions also target your mental health, and can bring about depression and anxiety. Fight back against this by working on your psychological well-being. Therapy is a useful tool for anyone going through a life-altering medical diagnosis.

COPD is not the end. In fact, the diagnosis is only the beginning of the rest of your life. Failure to act with purpose ensures negative coping, worsening symptoms and emergence of new problems, but swift and directed thoughts and behaviors will boost your likelihood of successfully coping with COPD.

The pressure is on, since the power is in your hands. Don't let that pressure overwhelm you. Let it compel you to amazing levels of coping. COPD doesn't stand a chance.

Russell's Road to Accepting COPD

I remember very clearly the day I sat in my specialist's office wondering, "How did I get here?" Being told you have lung disease conjures up many emotions and means a big life adjustment; how we move on from this largely depends on accepting the diagnosis.

Many COPD patients I come across are at varying stages of acceptance of their disease — some have accepted the cards they've been dealt and are working towards improving their quality of life, but too many are stuck in a place where they either don't accept their diagnosis or don't understand what's happening to them.

When I meet a COPD patient who is still smoking and ask them why, their responses vary from, "Well, my parents smoked 'til they died and they lived a long life," to "Well, you gotta die of something."

To me these responses indicate denial, which is a dangerous road to travel with COPD — the longer you leave your disease unmanaged, the quicker your health will deteriorate.

How Did It Come to This?

Pre-diagnosis some people suspect they have a serious problem, whereas I just thought my asthma had become worse. Up until my diagnosis, I'd been leading a healthy lifestyle and was exercising regularly. When my specialist told me I had COPD I had no idea what it was or what it meant for my future.

When you're told your lung capacity is 22 percent, it's a little hard to comprehend — but unfortunately spirometry tests don't lie. I think if I had been told my COPD was mild it would have been easier to accept. I still find it hard to believe my airways reached the stage they did without me realizing how much they had deteriorated.

On reflection, I realized I had smoked on and off for 30 years and for too much of that time was inactive, overweight and didn't manage my asthma well at all. It then become apparent to me why I ended up with COPD, and I'm lucky I realized when I did.

Next page: making a commitment to living well with COPD.

How Did It Come to This?

Some people are scared, some are in denial and others are wary of the stigma attached to COPD — the attitude that says if you smoked, you deserve it. However, all of these concerns can be overcome by learning about your disease and by learning that it isn't all doom and gloom.

Make a Commitment to Living Well

I know of people who have lived long and happy lives with good management of their COPD, just as I've known others who never truly understood their disease, tragically cutting their lives short.

As my journey continues it becomes harder to see people go through hardship with their disease, as I am living proof that you can successfully manage COPD. When I was first diagnosed I was scared of the future; when I first started learning about COPD, it seemed it could only be a downward spiral.

Being proactive with management of your COPD is a must on the path to acceptance as its only when you start fighting your disease that you find true acceptance of what you're dealing with.

Inspire People

You only need to type "inspiring COPD patients" into your search engine to find many patients living an improved quality of life. It doesn't matter what stage of COPD you're at: refusing to accept your diagnosis is a surefire way to cut your life short.

Recently a friend of mine with COPD, Vanessa Smith, completed a half marathon using oxygen. Vanessa is one of many active COPD patients who refuse to give in to this disease. I know of other patients who travel around their country talking to patients about how they've made positive change to have an improved quality of life.

My own journey has led me down a similar path. My blog COPD Athlete is where I detail my adventures and achievements to help motivate other patients. Rather than sit around feeling sorry for yourself, wouldn't it be better to help yourself to help others?

A Never-Ending Journey

There's no doubt that when you walk out of the doctor's clinic after being diagnosed that you'll have trouble fully comprehending the gravity of your disease. That understanding can only come with time and taking the right path. Talk to experienced people in the respiratory world, whether they're patients or healthcare professionals, and they will tell you that they never stop learning about COPD.

For me, acceptance has come from education, learning that COPD can be managed and that I can have a good quality of life. Yes, there will be things I can't do and being short of breath is a normal part my life. That's OK as there are plenty of things I can still do, like Ironman races and the New York City Marathon, for example.

Helping other patients find their feet and guiding them in the right direction is very rewarding. More and more we hear of patients living well with diseases that were once considered a death sentence. So join the army, accept your diagnosis and make your world a better place!