

WRIISC Fact Sheet for Veterans and Service Members

Self-Management for Better Health

Living and coping with chronic or “persistent” symptoms is a challenge for everyone, especially veterans who might have symptoms and health conditions related to deployment. If you are a veteran living with any chronic condition or symptom, regardless of the cause, self-management should become and remain part of your daily treatment plan. Self-management is a broad term most simply defined as what you can do yourself to manage your own health and live a better life!

Chronic Illness and Self Management

There are two main types of illnesses. Acute illnesses are short term and go away with treatment. Examples of acute illnesses are having the flu or a cold that goes away on its own or with treatment and/or medication. Chronic illnesses or symptoms are long-term and persistent and can possibly last throughout your life span without any “cure”. Since there is no cure, managing symptoms and emotions that result from chronic conditions is important to maintaining good physical and emotional health. Active self management can help you accomplish this.

Getting Started

Self-management includes a range of behaviors you can do yourself to improve your symptoms and help you live the best life you possibly can. Self-management has been shown to be effective in maintaining/improving health outcomes for patients living with chronic symptoms. Several different self-management strategies are effective across symptoms (meaning the same strategy might work for a person with pain or fatigue, etc). Some of these self-management strategies include: practicing good communication with your doctors and working closely with them, keeping copies of all of your medical records, exercising, eating healthy and practicing relaxation strategies such as guided imagery or meditation.

To become a more active self-manager, you may want to talk to your doctor about things that you can do for your specific symptoms. It is important when trying something new to set small goals that are attainable and not rush the process of becoming an expert in areas you are working to improve. For example, say you wish to eat healthier, you should start by saying you will do this 3 out of 7 days a week versus everyday. You will be able to

accomplish the goal if it is realistic and change your diet little by little as you go along.

A number of resources exist that can help you be an active self manager by incorporating different strategies into your day to day life. For example, *MyHealthVet* is one self-management resource for veterans enrolled in the VA healthcare system. This site is a useful key to managing your health records and medications and has excellent resources geared towards self-management. Visit the website at: www.myhealth.va.gov to enroll.

Living Better

Becoming a “self-manager” will help to empower you. You will feel more in control and more confident in your ability to manage your symptoms and conditions and to cope with the challenges that living with chronic symptoms presents (for example frustration, pain, fatigue and isolation). Most importantly, self-management can help you to maintain or improve your current level of function regardless of symptoms. You may even be able to decrease some of your symptoms. For example, exercise has been shown to reduce pain and fatigue and relaxation strategies have been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and/or fatigue.

Unfortunately you do not have control over the course of chronic conditions, but you can still control how you handle it and what you do yourself to make it better. Self-management is a key to living as well as possible with a chronic symptom or condition. You should always do what is necessary to take care of your illness, ask for help when you need it and do your best to practice self-management skills that may be beneficial to you. You can live a better life with your chronic health condition!