

The person suffering chronic illness undergoes several stages of adjustment. Often the most difficult stage is acceptance. If those close to the person in pain cannot adapt and accept, if they fail to build a complete support system for themselves, problems and stresses may overwhelm them and slow down or stop adjustment for all concerned.

Adjustment, then, is as important for the chronically ill as for those who live with or care about them. Yet most of us would probably feel guilt over focusing on our own adjustment. How can we have the nerve to look to our own feelings when someone we love suffers so deeply? The fact is that in chronic illness everyone suffers.

If the ailing person achieves some type of acceptance but everyone else in the family remains in denial, obviously enormous conflict and tension arise and drive people apart when they most need each other.

The famous Kubler-Ross model of grief and loss laid out in her book, *On Death and Dying*, can serve as a helpful guide. Though she developed this model for terminally ill individuals, her description of the five stages of loss—of life or of lifestyle—is universally applicable.

1. **Denial.** Because they wish so much the chronic nature of the illness did not exist, people involved are in disbelief or shock and may try to do things they can no longer accomplish.
2. **Bargaining.** In this phase, people begin to negotiate a way to make it different. They will feel guilty and wonder how they caused the illness or what they can do to make it better.
3. **Anger.** At some point both the person suffering and their loved ones will grow angry that the illness or situation has happened to them. Frequently they will blame someone else. The person who is ill blames the loved one. The loved one rankles at the change in the relationship and the balance of roles previously established. The anger also rears against oneself.
4. **Depression:** Beginning to feel the full impact of the loss, the person grows sad and depressed. Suddenly reality seems to smack them across the face.
5. **Acceptance.** Finally, people come to accept the finality of loss or change. They may still feel upset, but they accept that the loss has in fact occurred. They can hold onto the memories of how things used to be without feeling totally distraught. Only at this point can people begin to move forward with their lives.



Chronic illness involves loss, loss of a way of life, loss of the status quo. While the process of dealing with loss is very painful, there are some things you can do to ease the pain and make a more successful adaptation. So if you or someone you know lives with a person who suffers from chronic pain, it might be helpful to keep a few things in mind.

➤ **Give yourself permission to feel your own feelings.** Although you may have to give an inordinate amount, you are entitled to all of your feelings. Allowing yourself to have these feelings will help you not to act on those feelings. It is normal to feel angry and frustrated. You too are experiencing a loss of a previous way of life and need to deal with that a loss. Remember that feeling feelings is not the same as acting on them.

➤ **Don't try to "fix the person suffering from chronic pain."** The person suffering will experience a myriad of feelings and, at times, may project those feelings onto you. Both of you will benefit if you can be available to just listen and not personalize. Blaming is often an extension of feeling helpless, a feeling you understand as well. After all, neither you nor the sufferer can do anything to make the pain go away.

➤ **Share your feelings with someone.** You need an outlet to share your feelings. It is not always possible with the person in pain. Find someone who can listen to you in a nonjudgmental way: a friend, a member of the clergy, a professional counselor. Taking care of yourself will make it a lot easier to take care of the one you love.

➤ **Know your limitations.** Be careful not to take on more than you can handle. You may have taken on too much because the infirm may have had to give up many household duties. The danger lies in devoting your time

and energy to these things as a way of avoiding dealing with the illness, your relationship and your feelings.

People suffering with a chronic illness have a tremendous amount to deal with but their loved ones also need to be a part of this process. When this process occurs in an honest manner, everyone benefits. Just look at the case of Christopher Reeve. No one would argue that he is a remarkable person, but his wife has also shown tremendous strength. She openly speaks about how difficult it was for her and how much stronger their relationship is now as a result of their having struggled together.