

RELATIONSHIPS & PROBLEM SOLVING



People living with a chronic illness often need to make changes to their everyday lives. The examples in this brochure are meant as a guide only. We hope that you find some of these useful.

As a person living with hepatitis C, your friendships and relationships may have changed or been challenged since diagnosis, as chronic illness rarely affects only one person in a relationship or family. The energy put into dealing with illness, and particularly treatment, may have left you feeling unable to work on your relationships with others. A health crisis, however, can pose problems AND opportunities for relationships. There are things that you can do to keep your relationships healthy.

CHALLENGING FEELINGS

When people ask “how are you?”, how do you respond? Do you say, “I’m fine”? Do you go into detail about your illness or are you unsure what to say? For some, this question can cause frustration, confusion and sadness. You may doubt that they really want to know how you are. You could think that they are tired of hearing about your illness, or do not believe that you are actually sick if you still look healthy.

You may also be tired of talking about it. As hepatitis C is a poorly understood illness, you may feel lonely, vulnerable and sensitive to others. Without any visible signs of illness, you could feel the need to explain or over-emphasise your symptoms so that others will believe you. You may experience conflict between wanting to appear normal and wanting to be understood. You want to get better, but also want to be able to show others that you really are ill or in pain. Going through treatment can escalate these feelings. These are normal responses to your situation.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Accept changes and evaluate who is helpful: Chronic illness changes relationships, some get closer and others become strained. Accept that there are people you can count on for support and others you can’t. What you can’t get from one person you may find in another (whether kindness, understanding or a chance to escape).

Develop a life outside hep C:

- It’s good to have the understanding and support of others with hep C but it is also important to maintain other friendships.
- A variety of interests and relationships can help to meet your needs at different times.
- Relationships with others who aren’t hep C positive can help you escape the monotony of illness or distract you from the problems that you could be experiencing.

Communicate with those you feel close to:

- Everyone has needs, but you may have specific needs to meet due to your illness. By communicating these to others, it gives them the choice and opportunity to help and support you.
- You may feel that others think you are needy or will be overwhelmed by your requests for help, but talk to them, tell them what you want, need and expect.

Understand the feelings and needs of others:

- Hep C should not be used as a reason for everything that goes wrong.
- Others may have worries and challenges unrelated to your illness.
- People may experience fear, disappointment, loss and guilt because you have hep C and they don't.
- Others can feel helpless to change things

Give feedback:

- If someone does something that you find helpful, tell him or her how much you appreciate his or her support.
- If you feel that some people are not helpful it may be wise to distance yourself from them. When on treatment your health is a priority: think about what will keep you healthy and let this guide your decisions.

It can be difficult to sustain relationships, whether intimate or casual, at any time – but especially whilst on treatment. Some people will surprise you with their inability to help and others will exceed your expectations, giving more of themselves than you believed possible.

Relationships involve some give and take. Resolving problems in a relationship requires a joint effort - this means trying to understand a situation from both points of view. It can also mean being open to new ways of viewing situations. Problems can present opportunities for growth in your relationship, and you may find you actually grow closer together.

Some interpersonal sources for problems:

- Personal sense of injustice eg. how you became infected with hep C.
- Ineffective communication eg. problems relating to others.
- Personal characteristics.
- Personal beliefs and values eg. believing that you have limited options, that your future is uncertain and that your life is on hold.

Some external sources for problems:

- Lack of money e.g. due to long periods of absence from work.
- Role ambiguity e.g. chronically ill with hep C and the main breadwinner.
- Imbalance between the time you spend focusing on hep C and the time you spend on your relationships.

Successful problem solving involves using insights and ideas of both partners, motivating them to carry out their plans. Here are a few tips to help you and your partner work together to identify and discuss problems and plan future action.

Getting started

- Choose a suitable place and time for discussion – a comfortable setting where you will be uninterrupted.
- Identify your goals, the purpose of the discussion and what you want to achieve.
- Make sure that each of you contributes to the discussion.
- Each of you state what you believe to be the key issues in the situation.
- Each state the consequences of your action (for yourself and others involved).
- Each state the factors that influenced the decisions you made.
- State what you want.

- Keep track of the main ideas discussed; keep the discussion focused (don't start rattling off a list of grievances!)
- Put forward other ways you could have dealt with the situation.
- Negotiate – try to find a mutual solution. Consider using a mediator, someone to act as a go-between eg. professional counsellor.

Communicate clearly

- Set some ground rules at the start eg. both will have a chance to speak uninterrupted.
- Listen actively to your partner. Watch your body language - don't roll your eyes, pull a face etc. Try to keep eye contact.
- Sit in a relaxed fashion, do not fidget.
- Speak in a respectful and genuine manner.
- Talk to your partner, not about him/her.
- Eliminate blame and criticism. Start your sentences with "I" to let your partner know that you are talking about your feelings.
- Let your partner express his/her feelings: ask your partner how he/she feels about the matter or situation.
- Check for understanding, repeat the main points of what your partner is saying using his/her words.
- Acknowledge your partner's contribution to the problem solving process.
- Try not to walk out on the discussion without saying when you will resume the conversation.

Make a plan of action

A plan of action will specify what you and your partner will do differently to improve your relationship. Even achieving one of these steps can make a difference.

- Reach agreement on what is to be done (Set some realistic outcomes and priorities).
- Who will do what? (including other people you think should be involved e.g. your GP).
- What resources or services, if any, do you need and at what cost?
- When will action be taken?
- Take some action to support yourself and your partner as a result of the situation.
- Set a time to discuss how things are going.
- Regularly talk about your relationship.
- Reward yourselves – make a special time to do something together that you both enjoy.

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Hepatitis Helpline: (08) 9328 8538

Freecall (Country): 1800 800 070

Email: info@hepatitiswa.com.au

www.hepatitiswa.com.au