**Restrictions of Chronic Diseases, Consequences and Navigational Tools**

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) pandemic has highlighted the value of freedom in our everyday life. Here, I focus on the accumulative effects of navigating restrictions of chronic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, migraines, chronic pain, autoimmune conditions, cancer, and more within the pandemic context. The restrictions are doubly restrictive. The pandemic continues to weigh heavily on those with chronic diseases despite the lifting restrictions. Somehow when everyone is dealing with restrictions even though it is hard, it is less isolating. Below I provide examples of type of restrictions those with chronic diseases deal with, their impact and suggestions to navigate them.

The list of restrictions is not by any means exhaustive but hopefully provides guidelines when quality of life gets impacted. The restrictions vary in degree of their impact but also heightened by the pandemic experience. Someone who enjoys eating out, specifics food restrictions of a chronic disease are challenging. This is complicated by pandemic related barriers that impact availability of alternative options. Medications create a host of restrictions. Medications may require caution such as with specific foods, when to take medications, how to take them, avoidance of sun exposure, and managing side effects of cancer treatment. Tapering off medications can have a unique set of challenges and requires its own navigation. Heat intolerance associated with certain chronic diseases is more impactful now, given the climate changes of our planet. Awareness of when to engage in outside activities for one’s overall health becomes important. Similarly, vigilance in planning travel to other places not only related to Covid-19 but also with attention to weather considerations. Eating-outdoors may be desirable from Covid-19 perspective, yet it may be undesirable if extreme weather conditions appear. Certain activity restrictions such pacing oneself play a role with medical conditions like chronic pain, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, heart failure, and others. Medical conditions can limit capacity to work especially if problems with focus, memory or fatigue occur. Others may need quick access to bathrooms due to bowel or urinary urgency such as with gastrointestinal or neurological conditions that can limit outdoor activities. Masking in combination with unbearable heat has its own set of challenges. So does socialization with others especially when in company with others with different expectations with masking or testing.

It is obvious from the above description, that one restriction or more of the above is like a complicated mathematical formula and not easy to implement in our current times. Navigating the constantly changing multiple restrictions can become overwhelming. Restrictions are a change from the norm and are a form of loss. This is in addition to a host of other emotions including anxiety, guilt, frustration, anger, and sense of entrapment. It can create shame, self-blame, and embarrassment. It has potential to create conflict with a partner, family or friends because of the accommodations sought by the person with chronic diseases. These can be hard to ask for because they call attention to one’s chronic disease, concerns about judgment of others and it can be even harder if they are unacceptable to others. Everyday social interactions can become difficult and further impact one’s quality of life. Overall, it can become isolating to take care of one’s chronic disease.

Below are general suggestions for managing these restrictions, even though every individual is an expert on their condition. The specifics of a situation are important to implement the following four suggestions – recognition, HEAL acronym, decision making skills and seeking support. First, we need to recognize our reactions since we can gloss over them rapidly. Recognition means identifying our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors about these restrictions. Journaling is a great method to help with specific recognition of these reactions. Restricted ability to work due to a chronic disease can lead to thoughts such as “This is unfair;” “Why me?” with emotional reactions of anger, frustration and more overthinking, sleep problems which continues the downward spiral of negativity. Similarly, change of vacation plans due to weather considerations can create upset for us and our travel companions. Recognizing these reactions is helpful because it provides us with a road map of how to address them. There can be disappointment, sadness, frustration, and sense of loss. Acknowledgement of these valid emotions is an essential first step.

Next, step after recognition, labeling, and acknowledging reactions is how to let go, not hold on to the reactions or perseverate on them. Practice letting go with acronym HEAL.

**H** - **Habits**: Be aware that our mind tends to spin future tales about our restrictions or gets caught up in past regrets. It is common to engage in thinking habits such as personalization, catastrophizing, or generalization. Recognize these thinking habits by acknowledging them.

**E** - **Experience the present**: Next, gently guide self towards the present. Recognize the mind’s focus on future or past while guiding it to the present is one way of letting go.

**A** - **Anchor with self-compassion**: Health related restrictions do wax and wane. They are as unpredictable as the weather. If plans to certain events need cancellation because of changed circumstances, view such cancellations or decreasing workload as self-compassionate acts. Approach these restrictions and emotions of frustration, fear, uncertainty, guilt, loss with self-compassion or how one talks to a friend having a challenging time. Remind self that it is not easy to deal with these restrictions on a chronic basis. It can be calming to empathize with oneself and to remind ourselves that we are not alone in our struggles.

**L** - **Look for alternative perspective**: It is quite human to perseverate on self-blame, blaming others or our restrictions. Recognize the blame and evaluate if the blame tactic is useful. Do acknowledge the loss but also look for unseen benefits in the restrictions such as opportunities of engaging in hobbies that the work schedule did not allow for or more opportunity for self-care. Evolution has our human brains wired to look at the negative consequences, but our brains need training and practice to look at the positive consequences. Also, evaluate if consequences would be acceptable if one chooses to disregard the restrictions. This can help highlight that choosing to follow through with our restrictions is our choice. Humor can be a useful and important strategy for some to shift perspective also.

Decision making skills follow the HEAL steps of letting go. Our restrictions may require small and big decisions. Having a system to navigating these decisions can be helpful to manage the cascade of all that someone with chronic disease deals with. One such system is writing out a two-by-two table of pros and cons. This means doing pros and cons of having a reduced work schedule versus not or cancelling a trip versus not. Doing such a table can help evaluate choices on both sides. It helps to identify our values underlying the decision to consider a restriction for our health versus the cost of the restriction.

Also, seek out others who are likely to be supportive. Cast a bigger net for a social network, if possible. Support groups of those with chronic diseases may be useful to seek out too especially related to navigating pandemic restrictions and to address the isolation. We tend to value providing support to others and being useful. It improves our well-being. However, it is better to share our burdens with multiple others instead of relying on just a couple. Sharing with others the dilemmas of making complex decisions can provide a sounding board or help us consider different perspectives. Others are likely to be much kinder towards us than ourselves. Emotional support from others can help regulate our emotions about the challenges we face with our chronic diseases. Communicating effectively with others is essential. For example, we share our disappointments about cancelling plans while also caring for others by validating their disappointment also.

In conclusion, it is unfortunate that chronic diseases create complex demands and the ongoing pandemic concerns continue to be burdensome. This article describes the types of restrictions related to chronic diseases and the impact of restrictions on one’s emotional and social well-being. Most importantly, suggestions to navigate the emotional and social consequences of restrictions are provided.