

Developing Our Coping Skills

by Jo-Von Tucker

“Acceptance is not submission; it is acknowledgement of the facts of a situation, then deciding what you’re going to do about it.”

Kathleen Casey Theisen

For those of us who have been diagnosed with obstructive lung disease, one thing we know for sure is that life has thrown us a vicious curve. Every day presents a different set of problems and/or compromises... and we quickly learn that we must find ways to adapt and accept the new restrictions, or we will perish.

Each person with COPD develops his or her own unique way of dealing with the disease – our own individualized set of coping skills that we can apply to help us through the bad days and nights. One of the most difficult emotions that we may find ourselves facing is anger... self-directed anger that comes along with the realization that we are afflicted with a largely preventable disease... for the majority of us, one that could have been avoided had we never smoked cigarettes!

It is imperative that we learn to control the anger that we feel. Anger requires energy, and we have precious little to spare on an emotion that drags us into negativity. In addition to being physically efficient, we must also learn how to be emotionally efficient and energy conscious, expending our energy in ways that are nourishing to our souls. If we waste energy on fruitless emotions like anger, we won't be able to find the strength to pursue positive endeavors. The better we are at admitting openly that we feel such anger, the more energy we will save and the quicker we will be able to dismiss the harmful negative effects. Learn to say, "Aha! I'm irritated." And work on letting go of blame, shame, and emotional pain.

Another skill that we can develop to help us cope with chronic illness is keeping our expectations realistic... expectations of ourselves and of the world around us. We must learn to recognize those days on which we feel most limited, either by lack of physical strength or by time and commitment. Then we have to adjust our expectations accordingly. Chronic illness can make a person feel that they must surrender all of their goals and wishes. Obviously this isn't true. We just have to realize -- and recognize -- that we have more flexibility on some days than on others. Our focus on what we can do must change with the ebb and flow of our own energy level. As we learn to define our problems, our wants, and our needs, we need to seek realistic goals for ourselves; perhaps setting priorities that can result in resolution and accomplishment.

The solution may be as simple as asking for appropriate help. When we are sick and frightened, we may need a different kind of help than we might on easier days. It is our internal resistance that blocks us from simply reaching out for help when it is needed. Nearly all of us can grow emotionally in this respect. Asking for help can become a more graceful skill than we could ever have imagined. But of course, we must be careful never to overuse this method of coping.

If you have a hard time asking for help, look at it from a different perspective. Consider what you would do if you were able-bodied and a friend or family member asked *you* to help them. I doubt that any

of us would turn them down. We would help out the best way we could, and feel fine about doing so. In other words, try to be as kind to yourself as you would be to another.

These are only three of the many coping skills that we have at our disposal. There are many, many, more that will help us adjust to the illness that confronts us, and live graciously with the compromises required of us. Anger, unrealistic expectations and being too proud to ask for help when needed...keep in mind that these emotions come with COPD territory. Facing them straight on and finding ways to cope with them will help us make each day as good as it can possibly be.

Jo-Von Tucker's busy life as she knew it came to a screeching halt when, at age 52, she was told she had COPD. Her doctor also told her that she would have to wear oxygen 24-hours a day for the rest of her life, and that she had less than five years to live.

Did she go home and give up? No way! Jo-Von was a fighter and she went on to help herself and others by organizing a breathing support group and writing a book and a monthly newsletter for pulmonary patients and families. In addition, Jo-Von also worked with several organizations to improve oxygen accessibility and availability. Everything she did, she did with gusto and a no-nonsense Texas / Manhattan style, sometimes very bluntly saying, "We just have to get off our duffs and fix this!"

I met Jo-Von for the first, and only, time in late 2003 at the first National COPD conference in Arlington, Virginia. Just one month later she passed away unexpectedly from complications following surgery.

I share with you now some of her wisdom; and I'm sure she'd be most pleased that her words – and her spirit – are still at work to improve the lives of people with COPD everywhere.

JMM