How Do We Cope Living Alone With COPD?

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

Living Alone With COPD

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a complex disease that affects people in different ways, and while symptoms can be similar from patient to patient, no two people are the same. But for people who live alone, the differences are worlds apart.

It would be pointless to try and compare living with a partner versus living alone when you have COPD, as each have their good and bad points — but having someone to share the load is obviously a great benefit.

While living alone poses some unique challenges, many of the ways we deal with them are well-established methods that can apply to all walks of life.

Firstly, I have a wonderful wife and support network, so my experience is based on other patients I've talked to about this topic. Most COPD patients I've talked to who live alone find it difficult and can quite often suffer from depression as a result. But there is a select group who have taken their circumstance in their stride and carved out a wonderful life.

If I've learned anything since being diagnosed with COPD, it’s that only you can make your circumstance better. So it's simple, really — examine your lifestyle, make changes if necessary, go out and exercise to improve your health, then find a job/hobby that engages you and your life will be fabulous. You may even meet someone, fall in love, ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after.

If Only It Was That Simple

The reality is that while this isn't a bad plan, it's not as simple as this. If this is the life you desire, you'll have to make some tough choices and put in some hard work to get there, but you will be rewarded.

One common response I hear from patients who live alone is that it was hard at first, but once they decided the direction they wanted to take, the hard work payed off. I know of patients with severe COPD that travel around educating other patients about how they have turned their lives around, as well as patients leading busy lives and telling me they don't have time for a partner as their lives are too full.

In reality some people prefer a life of solitude and do so quite successfully, while others find it difficult to cope on their own.

Take Control

Like so many things in life, success depends on implementing strategies and seeing them through. Coping with living alone with COPD is no different.

Sit down and work out what that strategy is. How do you want to live your life? What steps are you going to put in place to achieve it? Break down the difficult parts of your life into manageable steps that don't overwhelm you.

There will always going to be non-negotiable chores relating to your health — medication, oxygen, doctor's visits, shopping etc. all take their toll. So why not break up the chores with the fun stuff?

Rather than looking at a particular day as a chore, look at it as some work and some play. The good stuff could be as simple as reading your favorite book to a favorite walk — whatever it is that will brighten up your day.

Don't sweat the small stuff. Many patients who live alone get worked up because they can't keep up with the household chores. While it's important to live in a clean environment, reaching out to a neighbor or friend to lend a hand is a far better option than getting worked up about what you can't do.

If this doesn't work for you, maybe breaking your week up into half work and half play is a better option. Some patients prefer to start the week with the unpleasant things, get them done and finish the week with fun stuff.

The important lesson is that in order to make your life more enjoyable you need to have balance.

Exercise

Patients I've come across who live alone all seem to have a common thread: exercise. These people, some with severe COPD, have all found that eating healthy foods, keeping their weight down, and plenty of exercise is the key to leading a fulfilling life.

Exercise for some has to be done in conjunction with supplementary oxygen, but they will greatly benefit from this. For those of you who have read my previous articles you'll know I'm an exercise advocate and bang on a lot about the topic. There's good reason for this, as many patients have discovered.

Having a healthy lifestyle that incorporates a regular exercise program changes your perspective on life and your ability to deal with day-to-day challenges. It's been proven in people with and without chronic disease that your coping mechanisms are far stronger when you're at your physical best.

Your physical best will depend on many physical and age limitations but if you're reading this article and know you aren't as active as you could be, then imagine how much more you could do with a healthier lifestyle.

Get Connected to Like-Minded Patients

Share your experiences, positive and negative. Be a part of your community. It doesn't matter how little your input is, as long as your being a part of the outside world, you will feel more connected and less alone.

I've seen so many inspirational COPD patients who live alone but live wonderful lives, and do so by choice. They identify their strengths and weaknesses and work on them. They are travelers, COPD advocates, writers, fitness fanatics, public speakers and much more.

I recently took part in a couple of conference calls that connected patients, carers and professionals all looking for similar outcomes. Afterwards I had a real sense of community and togetherness knowing that there are other people out there that can relate to what we go through as COPD patients.

What is your COPD destiny? Whether you live alone or with someone, you can work on your independence as there is so many people and resources that can guide you to a better quality COPD life.