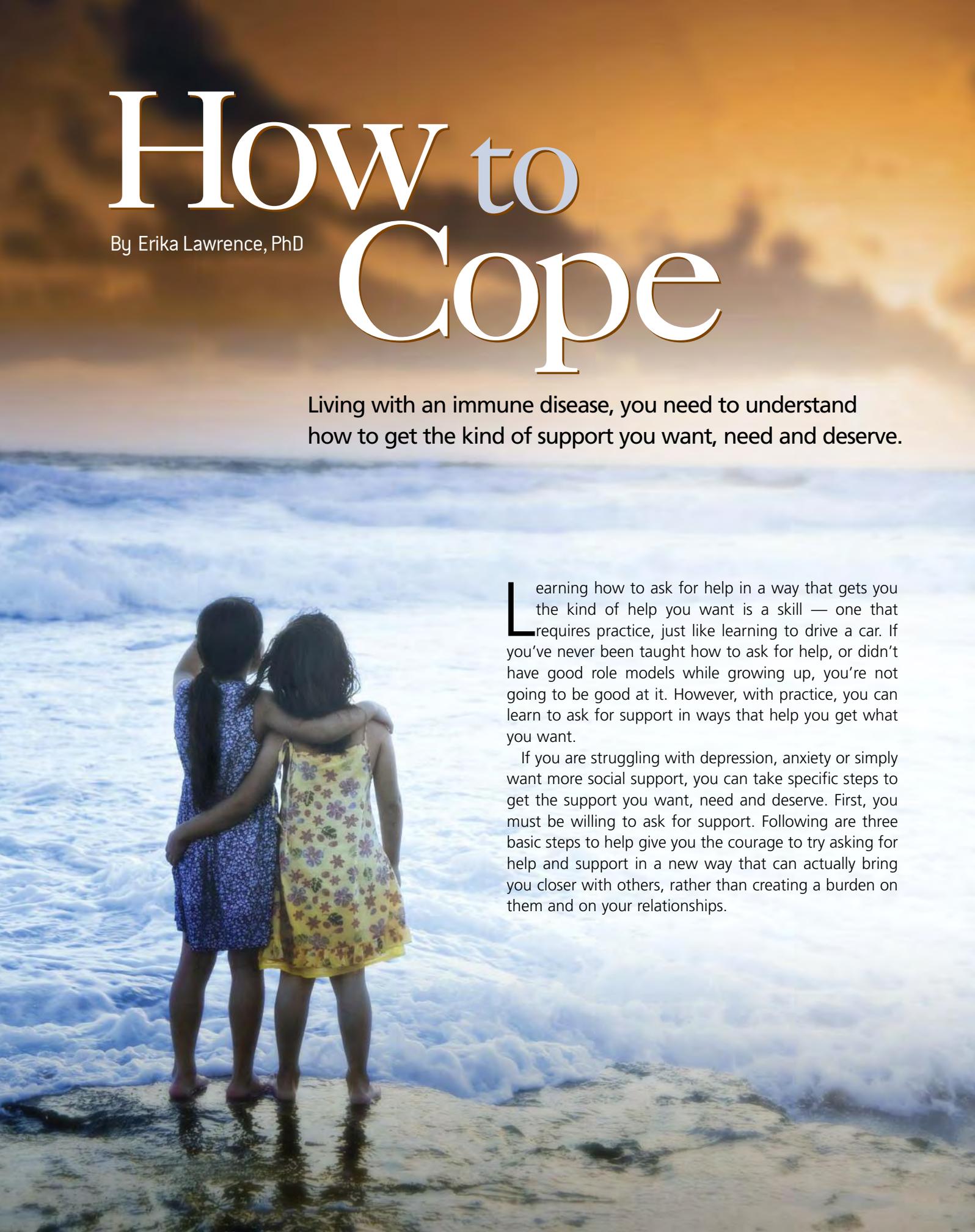


# How to Cope

By Erika Lawrence, PhD

Living with an immune disease, you need to understand how to get the kind of support you want, need and deserve.

A photograph of two women standing on a beach, looking out at the ocean waves. The woman on the left is wearing a blue patterned dress, and the woman on the right is wearing a yellow floral dress. They are standing close together, with the woman on the right having her arm around the woman on the left. The ocean waves are breaking in the background, and the sky is a mix of orange and blue, suggesting a sunset or sunrise.

Learning how to ask for help in a way that gets you the kind of help you want is a skill — one that requires practice, just like learning to drive a car. If you've never been taught how to ask for help, or didn't have good role models while growing up, you're not going to be good at it. However, with practice, you can learn to ask for support in ways that help you get what you want.

If you are struggling with depression, anxiety or simply want more social support, you can take specific steps to get the support you want, need and deserve. First, you must be willing to ask for support. Following are three basic steps to help give you the courage to try asking for help and support in a new way that can actually bring you closer with others, rather than creating a burden on them and on your relationships.

# Step 1

## Figure Out What Kind of Support You Need

If someone tries to help in a way that we don't like, we know it. However, many of us aren't sure what kind of help we actually want. There are four basic types of support:

- Emotional support: "I just want them to listen to me, to be empathetic and stop trying to fix things." Emotional support includes having someone simply sit and listen to you and let you know that they understand. It also includes physical comfort. You may not feel like talking about what is wrong that day, but would like someone to simply be there, sitting on the couch with you, or taking your hand or giving you a hug just to let you know they care.

- Tangible support: "On bad days, I just need someone to help me get dinner made." Tangible support is actual, concrete support with specific tasks. This support can be direct, like driving you to a doctor's appointment. It can also be indirect, which is when someone takes care of tasks you would normally have to complete, so that your time is freed up to take care of yourself. For example, someone might go grocery shopping for you, or take the kids out of the house for a few hours so you can get some rest.

- Informational support: "I need to talk this through with someone before I decide what to do." This type of support can help you think about a problem more objectively or in a new way. It can also help you gather information on a certain topic. However, unsolicited informational support can be the most frustrating, and the most damaging to a relationship. In particular, unsolicited advice is the most common way that people provide unwanted support.

- Esteem support: "I just want them to believe in me." Esteem support occurs when others express confidence in your ability to handle your illness or a particular challenge, or they tell you you're not to blame for your illness or for feeling particularly bad on a given day. When dealing with a chronic illness, esteem support can be unwanted. For example, if you do not feel as if you can handle your situation, and the person tells you you can, that feels invalidating rather than supportive. However, generally speaking, you can never get too much esteem support.

The key is to understand the kind of support you would

like and need to get. Only then can you communicate to other people what you want from them. You may find that you generally want emotional or esteem support. Alternatively, you may not want to talk about how you are feeling but would really like some help around the house once in a while.

Often, people want different kinds of support at different times. It may depend on how you feel that day, or what specific challenges you are struggling with at the time. You also may want different kinds of support from different people — emotional support from a friend and tangible support from a co-worker, for example. There also may be times when you simply want to be left alone. Regardless of the type of support you want, the key is to recognize what kind you need and then let the other person know.

# Step 2

## Get the Support Provider on Board

Becoming good at asking for help is an important skill. But, the other person needs to be able to provide that support as well.

"My family and friends do not understand my situation and special needs."

"They just don't get it because they don't see me regularly."

"They don't get it because some days I seem fine and others I don't."

"They think I am a hypochondriac."

"They think I just need to eat healthier."

Sometimes family members, friends and other loved ones are empathetic, caring people, but they simply do not understand the fluctuations of an immune disorder, or that you are ill even though they cannot "see" it. The trick is to set

a time to have a calm, rational, objective conversation about your illness with them. Think of this as an opportunity for you to help them. Your goal is to talk about your illness and what it is like for you in a way that they can understand. Communicate only as much about your experiences as they seem able to take in. People often get overwhelmed at some point, so you will likely not be able to tell them everything at once. Encourage them to ask questions. Stop and check in with them throughout the con-

*Often, people want different kinds of support at different times.*

versation to see what they're thinking and feeling. Keep the focus on them and on helping them better understand what your life is like. Only offer reading material if it is requested.

## Step 3

### Help Others Give the Kind of Support Needed

"When I'm in pain, how can I make my wife understand that this is not a good time to talk?"

"They keep offering advice, but I don't want it."

"Some days, I just want to be left alone, and they just don't get it."

Being good at providing support and help is also a skill that needs to be learned. It's not about providing support, but providing the right kind of support — the kind of support you want, not the kind they think you need. In other words, they need to follow the Platinum Rule: Do unto others as they would have you do unto them.

The most common complaint I hear is that people are giving unwanted advice (informational support). They think they're being helpful, and that you're just "not grateful" for the help. In most cases, people really want to be helpful. Their heart is in the right place, but they're just not good at providing you with help. So what can you do?

First, recognize that their intentions are good. They're not trying to make you feel invalidated and they're not necessarily unempathetic. They just need to learn a new skill. And when you talk to them, acknowledge and express appreciation for their efforts to be helpful and supportive. If you start off frustrated with them, or the person can tell that you think they're not a supportive, empathetic person, they will shut down and not change their behavior.

Second, tell them exactly what kind of support you want. Talk about how their kind of support makes you feel, and what you would like instead. If you give people specific suggestions about what you want, they are usually happy to do it.

Third, give them the opportunity to try this new way of helping you, and thank them for their efforts to change

their behavior. Again, it takes practice, so they won't be perfect at it the first time. Keep practicing.

### Keep the Support Going

Now the trick is to keep this communication going. In general, make sure that the relationship has some give and take. In addition to times when you need support from them, there should be times when you support them, even if it is just asking how they are and listening to the answer. Try letting them complain about something going on in their lives, even if it pales in comparison to what you're going through. Similarly, make sure the relationship is balanced between times when you are talking about problems and needing help, and times when you are simply having fun and enjoying each other's company without any mention of your illness or of needing any help.

There are many obstacles to getting the kind of help you need and deserve, and these are but a few. Try out some of these strategies. We all deserve to be listened to and supported. ■

*Being good at providing support and help is a skill that needs to be learned.*

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