NIU EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
Tips for Coping with a Chronic Illness

1. **Find ways to laugh...movies, books, cartoons, jokes. Humor is as important to healing as crying.** Both laughing and crying release endorphin hormones that help you get through the emotional and physical pain. A hearty belly laugh or a smile boosts your immune system. Your smile doesn’t even need to be genuine to be effective.
   - Have a collection of movies and cartoons that always make you laugh.
   - If a situation is bothering you and you can’t find the humor, visualize the people in clown face.
   - When friends ask what they can do, tell them to send you funny stories.
   - The NIU Breast Cancer Support Group came up with a list of funny books (see Breast Cancer Survival Tips). A favorite is Janet Evanovich’s mystery series. These are laugh out loud books.

2. **Fear comes and goes so when you feel scared, breathe deeply into your fear to rebalance the feeling.**
   - Take a deep breath in through your nose and slowly release it through your mouth as you first experience your fear. Then take 2 more slow deep breaths and continue to breathe into your fear as you need to. If you feel panicky, exhale slowly before you inhale through your nose to rebalance your panicky breathing.
   - Visualize your adult self, sitting next to your scared self and comforting your scared self. You can acknowledge and comfort yourself when you need to and still find ways of enjoying the moment.
   - As a way of comforting yourself, rock in a rocking chair. Thirty minutes of rocking reduces pain and anxiety which is your fear projected into the future.
   - Keep your journal next to your rocking chair so if your fear continues to invade your present, you can journal and begin to let go of it.
   - Create a Mantra that acknowledges your feeling/fear, reminds you of your strengths, and refocuses your attention. “I am scared. I can face my fear. I have faced scary times before and can handle this. I am going to find joy today wherever I can.”
   - Listen to soothing music. The beat and rhythm in music can change your mood. See www.tuneyourbrain.com. If you don’t have music available, sing or hum a song.

3. **You are in charge of what you let disturb your peace of mind even though it doesn’t feel like it.**
   - Always acknowledge your feelings and accept them. All of your feelings, particularly fear, have something to teach you.
   - If your feelings are disturbing your peace of mind, wear a white paper hole reinforcer on your watch, sleeve, or hand and tell yourself: “I am in charge of what I let inside. I will focus on being present in this moment and accept whatever is.” By looking at the white reinforcer, you will be reminding yourself frequently that you are in charge of what you let in. Think about wearing it when you go to the doctor’s
office. The white circle can help you remember to let in the information and not the fear. Deal with any fear later.

♦ When you are caught in “negative” thoughts and feelings, change them to positive thoughts or mantras. See Coping with Depression Handouts.

4. **Everyone only has this very moment: a chronic illness forces you to make the most of each moment and to focus on what is most important to you.**

   ♦ Most of us allow the unimportant to fill up our time, energy, and focus. When you have a chronic illness, how you choose to spend your limited energy become very important so your focus shifts to what is important in this moment.

5. **Balance in life becomes important to being able to do more of what you love.** Maintaining your balance is like being on a seesaw; you will not maintain perfect balance all the time and adjustments will need to be made.

   ♦ Do what you can and then take a break. Some days your breaks may seem bigger and longer than your activity. The breaks are time to practice being and enjoy the results of your doing, however much it is.

   ♦ Pay attention to your body and be aware of how much you push yourself. Make sure you push yourself to do the things that bring you the most joy.

   ♦ Don’t hold yourself to self-imposed expectations. Do the best you can in a given moment.

   ♦ Accept, accept, accept what you can’t do and ENJOY WHAT YOU CAN DO.

   ♦ Some things are worth doing too much…accept that you will be out of balance and then take time to rebalance.

   ♦ Balance is also about doing part of something and not all of it. When you have less energy, it is important to find the part you can do to bring you joy rather than not doing anything.

5. **Appreciate and be grateful for everything and everyone in your life.** Being grateful for what is whenever you can, keeps you on your healing journey.

   ♦ Being grateful or appreciating what is, does not mean that you do not still feel fearful or angry. It means that you can feel grateful while you acknowledge that your anger or fear is sitting next to you.

6. **When people offer to help, tell them something specific that they can do.** Remember, asking for what you need is a sign of strength; refusing to ask when you are in need is a sign of weakness.

7. **Remember, “I am enough. My presence is enough. We all (everyone close to me) will just have to accept what I have to give.”** When I feel I am enough somehow it seems easier to ask for what I need and to accept what I a can and cannot give.

**Prepared by: The NIU Breast Cancer Support Group**