

Cancer diagnosis and mental health

What to know and ways to cope



If you're reading this, it likely means you or someone you care about has been diagnosed with cancer. While your medical team will guide you through treatment options and what to expect, this article is intended to offer support and understanding during the emotional challenges you may face along the way.

It's important to note that cancer comes in many forms and severities. Some cancers are very treatable and have high survival rates, especially with early detection. Others are more severe and less predictable. Whatever the case, learning that you or a loved one has cancer can be overwhelming and affect every part of life. It's natural to feel:

- Shock and disbelief
- Fear and anxiety
- Sad, angry or guilty
- Lonely or isolated
- Out of control and frustrated

It's also natural to feel mental distress and ask yourself questions like:

- 'Why me?'
- 'Did I do something wrong?'
- 'What will happen to me and my family?'

You might experience shifts in your sense of identity and purpose, or struggle with feelings of hopelessness and loneliness. You might feel a sense of loss and grief too.



4 February



World Cancer Day

There is no right or wrong way to feel when facing cancer, as everyone's reactions and emotions are unique. Intense emotions like sadness, anger and anxiety are natural responses. For example, many people feel anxious before starting treatment, wondering how effective it will be or how they'll cope with side effects. For some, these feelings return as they go through treatment and recovery and face uncertainty and physical changes.

Coping with cancer

While your cancer diagnosis may make you feel like much is unknown and out of your control, using self-help strategies can help you feel more in control. Consider the following ways to help yourself get through your treatment journey.

Control what you can

While cancer can make you feel powerless, focusing on things that you can control (like staying informed about your treatment, asking questions and keeping to a daily routine) can give you a sense of stability.

So can making decisions with your own best interests in mind. For example, it can be very difficult to tell loved ones about your diagnosis. It can also be stressful and taxing fielding well-meaning questions and check-ins. Empower yourself to share only as many details as you want to. Also, consider assigning a delegate, such as a trusted family member or friend, to provide those close to you with updates and answer questions on your behalf.

Feel your feelings

Some people who have cancer feel pressure to be upbeat and positive, especially for their family and friends. While maintaining hope is important, you don't have to fake it or sugarcoat what you're going through. Doing so could make you feel more exhausted and drained.

Give yourself the time and space to feel and acknowledge your emotions as they come to you. If you feel sad and tired, that's OK. It's also OK to feel scared, sad, angry or whatever else you're feeling.

It's important to process your feelings. Consider ways to help yourself express what you're feeling, such as journaling, talking to a trusted friend or joining a support group. By acknowledging and understanding your emotions, you can manage them more effectively and build resilience. Bottling your feelings up can increase stress, anxiety and depression, amongst other concerns.

Also, consider boundaries that can help you process difficult emotions. For example, it might help to give yourself one day to feel sad or angry, and then commit to doing things you enjoy the next day. Or take a break from answering emails and phone calls and instead set a specific time to respond.

Practise calming techniques

Deep breathing exercises, meditation and mindfulness can help reduce stress and bring calm. Even taking a few minutes each day to focus on your breathing can help you find calm and focus. Reframing negative thoughts as they enter your mind may also help. Try to remind yourself of past challenges you've overcome. Shifting your mindset can build resilience and reduce anxious feelings and hopelessness.

If possible, engage in gentle physical activities like walking or stretching, as exercise can improve mood and help manage stress.

Build a support system

Some people with cancer experience feelings of loneliness. Some also isolate themselves from others for various reasons, such as feeling vulnerable or unlike themselves. But connecting with others can benefit your overall health and wellbeing in many ways, including boosting your mood, reducing stress, giving a sense of purpose and belonging, and improving immune function.

Even if you're surrounded by people you love, you may feel lonely, especially if it feels like no one understands. In this case, some people with cancer find it helpful to connect with others who've faced the disease, whether through a support group, listening to podcasts or other resources.

Be kind to yourself

Being kind to yourself can take many forms, including being patient with yourself as you adapt to your new normal and managing your own expectations. It's natural to feel a lot of emotions, and, at times, you may even feel like giving up. But know that this feeling passes for most people. Celebrating the wins and milestones can help you stay centred and focused on moving forwards.

Staying informed can help too. Talk to your healthcare team about your options and what to expect at each step. Make sure you understand what they're telling you. Ask questions to clarify and consider bringing someone you trust to appointments for support and an extra pair of ears.

Do your best to cover the basics of health and wellbeing, such as getting enough quality sleep, eating nutritious foods, staying active and maintaining a work-life balance as much as possible.

Prepare yourself for what's next

Completing cancer treatment can be both a relief and a new source of anxiety. Many survivors feel lost, uncertain, or worried about their cancer returning. Entering the 'survivorship' phase often brings a mix of emotions, from gratitude to fear. Regular checkups, support groups and discussing follow-up care plans with your healthcare team can help.

Know the mental health risks and signs

While it's natural to feel a variety of strong emotions when facing cancer, the experiences can sometimes lead to more severe mental health concerns. People diagnosed with cancer are at a higher risk of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

- **Anxiety** – Anxiety can arise from various sources, including getting the diagnosis, dealing with treatment, facing side effects, or waiting for test results. Signs include feeling nervous or on edge, struggling to control worry, restlessness and feeling physically tense.
- **Depression** – Approximately 25% of cancer patients experience depression, which can start soon after

diagnosis or later. Signs include persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness or guilt, as well as changes in sleep and appetite.

- **PTSD** – Some people experience PTSD symptoms related to cancer, such as intrusive thoughts, nightmares or a sense of emotional numbness.

Recognising these signs early and seeking mental health support can improve your overall wellbeing and quality of life. Left untreated, mental health concerns can worsen. They may also lead to other health problems, including a weakened immune system, digestive issues, worse treatment side effects and slower physical recovery.



When to seek help

If intense emotions continue for 2 or more weeks and disrupt your day-to-day life, it's important to ask for help. Consult with your medical team or mental health professional for support. A medical or mental health professional can help determine what's at the root of your symptoms and help you take steps to manage them.

Sources

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