



# Taking Care of Your Mental Health during Cancer

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A cancer diagnosis is life-changing. We all know that cancer can affect our bodies in profound ways. However, you may not realize how much it can also affect your mental health. It can be a source of considerable emotional stress on both you and your loved ones. You may experience feelings of depression, anxiety, and fear after someone has been diagnosed with cancer. This guide will help you decide whether you are having a normal reaction to a cancer diagnosis or whether you may have a mental health concern.

## Challenges to Mental Health after a Cancer Diagnosis

Diagnosing cancer and mental health concerns appropriately increases the likelihood that treatment and recovery are possible. What's interesting is that cancer and mental health issues can have the same symptoms, including low energy, being tired all the time, lack of sleep, and decreased appetite. These similarities can make it difficult to recognize mental health issues.

Sadly, there are many people with cancer that have not been informed about the possibility that they may develop a mental health concern after a cancer diagnosis. They also may not receive treatment for it. Cancer care teams may not have a designated professional who has the specific skills to recognize mental health conditions. So much time and money is spent on the cancer



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treatment that a mental health issue may fall to the bottom of the priority list. Many feel like their mental health is less important. As a result they may not seek help or treatment. Untreated depression can lead to poorer outcomes for the cancer. Studies have shown that cancer patients who are dealing with severe mental health issues and substance use may even have lower chances of survival after a cancer diagnosis.

**General mental health** includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being and influences how we think, feel, and act. A cancer diagnosis can affect all aspects of your daily life: relationships, work, and daily activities. Up to 33 percent of people treated for cancer in hospitals may have a mental health condition. Adult cancer survivors may be more than twice as likely to develop disabling psychological problems as adults without cancer.



**Depression** is a mood disorder that causes a lasting feeling of sadness or loss of interest. It can interfere with your day-to-day functioning and make following a treatment plan difficult. Major depressive disorder rates may be up to three times higher in cancer patients than in the general population. From 8 to 24 percent of people with cancer may also be coping with depression.

**Anxiety** is the feeling of unease, fear, and/or dread caused by stress. People with anxiety may be afraid of uncontrollable pain, dying, or what may happen to them after death. Long-term cancer survivors are more likely to experience anxiety than the general population. As many as 11 percent or more of people with cancer may also be living with anxiety.

## **Mental Health Treatment Saves Lives**

Mental health treatment can dramatically alter the course of cancer treatment. Studies have found that those who got treatment and as a result had fewer symptoms of depression, had longer average survival times than those who had more depression symptoms. Cancer patients who get treatment for mental health issues frequently see improvements in their overall medical condition. They also have a greater likelihood of following through properly with their medical care. They are more likely to have a improved quality of life.

## **Asking for Help**

A cancer diagnosis can trigger some very powerful emotions. Anxiety and depression can be common results. Being common, however, doesn't make these feelings easier to manage. These emotional symptoms can make your situation feel insurmountable. If you or a loved one are feeling like you cannot manage, it is very important to seek professional help. A good start can be your primary care provider or



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physician. It is important to focus on more than just physical symptoms, such as a headaches or heart palpitations. Share the behavioral and emotional symptoms as well. Any of the following symptoms should be mentioned to your medical professional.

### ***Physical***

- Fatigue and lack of energy
- Changes in sleep
- Weight changes
- Overeating or loss of appetite
- Constipation
- Headaches
- Loss of sexual desire
- Unexplained aches and pains

### ***Behavioral***

- Crying spells
- Withdrawing from others
- Neglecting responsibilities
- Loss of motivation
- Use of drugs or alcohol
- Obsessive or compulsive behavior
- Distress or phobias
- Self-injury

## **Emotional**

- Sadness or guilt
- Mood swings
- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Lack of emotion
- Anger
- Suicidal thoughts
- Anxiety and fear
- Mind racing or going blank

## **Tell Your Loved Ones How to Help You**

Patients with more support often feel less anxious and depressed. They also report an improved quality of life. Asking family members and loved ones for various types of support as they are needed may help reduce both the patient's distress and the constant worry of their loved ones. Ask your loved ones to:

- Engage in positive conversation and in activities you enjoy with you.
- Talk to you about their fears and their feelings, even when this might be difficult.
- Listen and help you with your own fears and feelings Help you make and keep appointments for your cancer treatment and for your mental health treatment.
- Help you get involved with support groups and local events where you can all meet other families who are coping with similar experiences.

## **Mental Health Best Practices After a Cancer Diagnosis**

- Focus on getting enough sleep. Short naps or short rest times during the day can help to maintain energy levels. Undisturbed night sleep is important. Try simple relaxation techniques before you go to sleep. If insomnia is a problem for you, bring it up with your doctor.



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- Focus on exercise as your stamina allows. Even a short walk in the fresh air can help to lift mood. Physical activity and light exercise can increase muscle strength and energy levels.
- Commit to a healthy diet. Cancer and cancer treatments can wreak havoc on your appetite and weight. It is critical that cancer patients have a varied diet of healthy foods and adequate fluid intake.
- Celebrate successes and reward yourself. Sometimes even just getting out of bed is an accomplishment. Celebrate those things that are hard to do that you did anyway. Reward yourself for things you accomplish. This does not just include tasks and responsibilities! It can also include things like asking for help, keeping a positive attitude, or keeping an appointment even when you don't feel like it.

- Purchase several books to have ready to read on difficult days.
- Focus on the positive memories of your life and try to maintain a positive attitude about the present and future.
- Continue your favorite hobbies! Don't let these get lost, whether you love art, music, gardening, volunteering at an animal care center, or participating in a book club.



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## Questions to ask Your Health Care Team

Talking with the cancer care team about concerns may help you feel more comfortable. Bring up your fears, thoughts, and emotions. Someone on the team can answer your questions and talk about any concerns. They can also refer you to a mental health professional at any time it is needed. Following are some good questions to ask:

- Is there a local peer support group I can participate in?
- Can you provide a list of mental health professionals in my area?
- What books or other self-help strategies would you recommend?
- Do I need to be prescribed a medication to help me with my depression/anxiety?
- Can you recommend any resources that I can read to learn more about the cancer or its treatment?
- Who can I call first if I feel like I need help for anxiety or panic attacks?
- Who can I call first if I feel like I am getting depressed?
- What do I do if I begin to feel suicidal?

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