



DANA-FARBER/BRIGHAM AND WOMEN'S CANCER CENTER

Anxiety

Understanding Anxiety

Anxiety is defined as feeling nervous, on edge, or worried much of the time. Anxiety is a normal human emotion that alerts your body to respond to a threat. However, intense and prolonged anxiety may interfere with your daily activities and relationships. Many cancer survivors find that after treatment has ended there are still many sources of anxiety related to your disease. You may be having anxiety about the cancer returning or spreading after you have completed your treatment, and subsequently feel worried about visits with your doctor. When wrestling with these things it is important to remember that you are a part of a community of many breast cancer survivors and that you are not alone.

Ways to Ease Your Anxiety

Relaxation techniques

May be used alone or with other types of treatment, such as counseling or medication, to help control the symptoms of anxiety. Additionally, you may try:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation (a technique that involves tightening and then relaxing muscles, starting at either the toes or the head and progressively relaxing all the muscles across the body)
- Guided imagery (the use of words and sounds to help you imagine positive settings, experiences, and feelings)
- Meditation (a practice of focusing attention in one direction to achieve a sense of grounding in the present moment and reduce stress)
- Hypnosis
- Biofeedback (the use of the mind to control a response from the body, such as heart rate, by paying attention to signals from the body that are measured with electrodes, which are painless electrical sensors)
- Yoga (the use of breathing and posture exercises to promote relaxation)

Psychological treatment

- By talking with a trained professional, you may learn strategies to help reduce anxiety or constant worrying.
- Options include individual therapy, couples or family therapy, and group therapy.

Talk to your doctor

Medication and psychological treatments may also be available to help you. Although it may be difficult to explain the sense of dread or fear you feel, it is important to be open with your health care team about your feelings, specific sources of your fears, physical symptoms you experience, and the effect on your daily life. This will help them help you and identify appropriate treatments to lower your anxiety.

When Should You Call for Help?

- You feel your anxiety is getting worse and limiting your basic everyday function – getting out of bed, eating, showering, etc.
- You feel recurring or frequent shortness of breath, chest pain, or palpitations (racing heart sensations).



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Depression/Sadness

Understanding Depression

A cancer diagnosis can cause feelings of sadness, loss of interest, anxiety and/or anger. Periods of sadness following a cancer diagnosis are natural. However, extended periods of sadness can lead to the more serious side effect of depression and are reason for concern. Medications during and following treatment can also affect one's mood.

Why does it happen?

Depression can happen if sadness or despair seems to take over your life. People are more likely to experience depression after cancer if they have been diagnosed with depression in the past, have close family members with depression, have significant anxiety or worry, are facing cancer alone or without the support of friends or family, or have financial burdens. Although depression is more common among people with cancer, it should not be considered a normal part of living with cancer. Identifying and then managing depression are important parts of coping with cancer.

What are the symptoms of depression?

- Mood: a feeling of "sadness", "despair", "hopelessness" most of the day, apathy, loss of interest or pleasure in most activities
- Sleep: early awakening or excess sleepiness, insomnia
- Fatigue: low energy
- Behavioral: agitation, excessive crying, irritability, or social isolation
- Cognitive: trouble concentrating or thinking, or thoughts of suicide
- Weight: decreased or increased appetite with weight gain or weight loss
- Frequent or recurrent thoughts of self-harm or death

Ways to Ease Your Depression

Depression is a medical diagnosis and should first and foremost be managed with the aid of professionals. If you have noticed yourself experiencing any of the above symptoms, contact a health care provider, whether your PCP, oncologist or other for help. In addition to seeking professional help, there are many additional ways you can help yourself:

Talk to a friend or family member

- Expressing how you feel to someone you trust can help you feel more in control.
- Reach out to family and friends and recognize that each person is an individual and might be able to help in some ways better than others. Think of the acronym FDR:
 - "F" is for feelers, the ones you can be emotional with;
 - "D" is for doers, people who feel better providing practical supports such as transportation, preparing a meal, or helping with housecleaning;
 - "R" is for respite types who might be good at providing distractions from the worries of cancer with a meal out, a movie, or a fun afternoon.



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Maintain some degree of physical activity

- Multiple research studies have shown that physical activity during and after treatment is very helpful for both the mind and the body.
- Your activity level might change from what you did before your diagnosis; however, simple walks, swimming, and time in a local park may really help.
- Because of the impact your cancer and treatment might have on you, it is important to discuss physical activities with your medical team.

Eat a balanced diet

- To give you the nutrition your body requires to heal.

Spend time with a pet

- It has been well-documented that interacting with a dog (or other domesticated animals) can reduce blood pressure, ease stress and anxiety, and contribute to an overall sense of well-being.
- Even small pets such as fish or birds can bring sounds and activity into a household.

Mind-body spirit techniques

- Yoga, meditation, visualization, tai chi, chi gong, prayer, and singing are practices that help restore our bodies, calm our minds and reignite our hope during stress-filled days. Many hospitals and cancer centers now provide information on these techniques and groups in which to practice.

Write in a journal

- Journaling can help to reduce anxiety. Writing about your thoughts and feelings, especially after being diagnosed with cancer, is a good way to help process what is happening and often helps to make the experience more manageable.

Support groups

- A support group provides a chance to meet and interact with other people who can understand your experience. Building a support network can lessen the isolation that often comes with a cancer diagnosis. A support group is a unique opportunity to connect with others impacted by cancer.

Counseling

- Feeling stressed or anxious while coping with cancer is common. Face-to-face or over the phone counseling provides a safe space to voice any concerns to better cope with these changes. An oncology social worker can also help find local resources and programs that meet your needs.

Talk to your care team at your next clinic visit if you are interested in trying any of these strategies.

When Should You Call for Help?

- You have thoughts of suicide or harming yourself in any way.
- Your symptoms are bothersome or worsening.
- Depression is limiting your ability to care for your basic needs.
- There is concern for your or others' safety.