



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

ANXIETY AND CANCER

Anxiety is a natural response to a cancer diagnosis, whether for ourselves or a loved one. Our bodies engage a flight, fight or freeze mechanism that can become overwhelming. As chronic anxiety can lead to fatigue and depression over time, it is important to find stress-relieving techniques that work for you.

RECOGNIZING CHANGE

Anxiety after a cancer diagnosis is natural, but can sometimes overwhelm you, be persistent and affect your everyday routines. If so, it may help to identify patterns of negative thoughts to help find ways to cope.

You might ask yourself the following questions:

- What situations or events trigger these automatic responses?
- Is there any evidence to support this anxiety, or might it be unfounded?
- Am I looking at both sides of the issue?

Taking a moment to examine these feelings may help identify when they are most severe and best how to counter them. For a practical measure, try to counter these negative thoughts with a series of three alternative, positive, self-supportive statements to yourself. You may also find help in other ways.

COPING WITH ANXIETY

There are some steps you can take to minimize anxiety, which can include the following:

Talk to your health care team. It's important to let your health care team know about any changes, whether they are emotional or physical. Members of your health care team can also provide resources to help you cope with the emotional impact of cancer.

Engage in physical activity. Exercise improves fitness and strengthens your ability, in both mind and body, to cope with cancer. It may be best to start small, especially if you are experiencing fatigue. There are plenty of small changes that can be made to increase your physical activity.

Walking is a gentle way to get into exercising. You may want to start by walking 5 to 10 minutes and build from there. Keep in mind that you should talk with your doctor before starting any type of exercise.

Practice mind-body-spirit techniques. Mind-body-spirit techniques, such as 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. For more information, read our "Cancer and Yoga" and "Relaxation Techniques and Mind/Body Practices" fact sheets.

Here's a simple breathing exercise that you can try.

- Sitting down, place one hand on your chest and the other over your navel.
- Take three breaths and observe your breathing. For most people, the chest area tends to rise more than the abdomen.

(over)

- Now, take in a deep breath and extend your abdomen. Picture your lungs as long, narrow balloons, filling up from the back to the front and from the bottom to the top.
- Hold the breath and silently count to five; then, exhale loudly.
- Do this for three breaths and then sit quietly for a moment. If you feel lightheaded, hold the next breath for a shorter time. Most people find there is a calming feeling that follows.

If breathing exercises are not helpful and you feel as though you are panicking, a grounding technique would be a useful tool to help reduce some of your anxiety:

This somatic grounding technique may be a useful tool.

- Name 5 things you can see. Breathe.
- Name 4 things you can hear. Breathe.
- Name 3 things you can smell. Breathe.
- Name 2 things you can taste. Breathe.
- Name 1 thing you can touch. Breathe.

Journaling. Journaling is another tool that can help you process your thoughts and feelings. Research shows that journaling can serve as an outlet to feelings that are difficult to express otherwise. When you write about your worries and fears, you can review them later to be more aware of what thoughts are causing you to feel anxious and help you reframe those thoughts.

Join a support group. 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 cancer diagnosis. A support group is a unique opportunity to connect with others impacted by cancer. CancerCare provides support groups online, over the phone and face-to-face throughout the year for people living with specific cancer diagnoses, caregivers and the bereaved. These groups are moderated by an oncology social worker.

Seek counseling. Feeling stressed or anxious while coping with cancer is common. Face-to-face or telephone 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 fit your needs.



CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include case management, counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master's-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit www.cancercare.org or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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