

# Depression and Anxiety

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Sadness and grief are normal reactions to cancer. At times during diagnosis, treatment and survival, you may experience difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, despair, sadness, guilt and anger. If these symptoms persist for long periods of time and you notice you have lost interest in your usual activities, you may be depressed.

## Signs of Depression:

- Having a depressed mood most days
- Loss of pleasure or interest in activities
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Sluggishness
- Poor concentration
- Tiredness
- Feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt
- Thoughts of death or suicide (not just fear of death)

*\*Note: If you find yourself developing a plan to commit suicide or intend to commit suicide, this is a mental health emergency. Please call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room immediately.*

*\* The above symptoms can also be related to other aspects of cancer and treatment and you can experience them without being depressed.*

At many times during treatment and recovery, you may feel anxious and/or afraid. For many people, finding out they have cancer or that their cancer has returned creates great anxiety/fear. Fear about doctor appointments, tests, procedures and treatment may cause apprehension (i.e., feeling like something bad will happen that is out of your control). It is normal to feel worried and afraid. People may be afraid of uncontrolled pain, being dependent on others, being left alone, dying, or what happens after death, including what may happen to loved ones.

## Signs of Anxiety:

- Uncontrollable worry/racing thoughts
- Trouble solving problems/focusing attention
- Muscle tension
- Trembling, shaking, or other signs of restlessness
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Angry outbursts
- Irritability (short-tempered or grouchy)
- Difficulty breathing
- Racing heart/chest pain

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## Ways to manage depression & anxiety:

- Remember it is OKAY to feel sad or worried.
- Talk with friends or family about your feelings.
- Be active (e.g., go for a short walk, do some light cleaning, meet a friend).
  - o Set small, doable goals. It may be overwhelming to think about doing an activity for hours. Instead, focus on what you can do for 20-30 minutes.
- Write your thoughts and feelings in a journal &/or write down your worries. Once they are written down, tell yourself you do not need to think about them right now because you can read them over if need be. Then, think about, or go do, something enjoyable.
- Try deep breathing and relaxation exercises. Close your eyes, breathe slowly and deeply, focus on the rhythm of your breathing and notice how your body starts to relax (may feel a bit heavy and warm) as your breath moves through your body. When relaxed try to think of a pleasant place such as a beach in the morning or a sunny field on a spring day.
  - o It may be helpful to take a few minutes several times a day to sit quietly and breathe.
- Engage in activities you enjoy & set aside some time each day to do something relaxing and/or fun. Go for a walk, take a bath, spend time with family/friends, read a good book, etc.
- Notice what you are telling yourself. If you are having a lot of negative thoughts (e.g., "I am useless") work to change these thoughts to be more balanced (e.g., "My treatment makes me tired and I am doing the best I can.")
- Strive to think about the present moment without spending too much time thinking about the past or the future. Ask yourself "What is happening right now?" and focus on that.
- Recognize what aspects of cancer are in your control and what is out of your control. Focus on what you CAN control (e.g., your thoughts, how you spend your free time, how you treat others, etc).
- Join a cancer support group. It can be very helpful to talk with others who are going through a similar experience. \* A member of your medical team can provide you with support group information.
- Take some time to do something for someone else. Many people feel good when helping others.
- Consider talking with a psychologist or social worker. Mental health professionals can offer you support and help you cope.

## How a psychologist can help:

- A psychologist can provide you with strategies to manage depression & anxiety symptoms. Some of these strategies include:
  - o Assisting you in noticing the things you say to yourself and if these thoughts are unhelpful and leading you to feel depressed or anxious, helping you change these thoughts to be more balanced.
  - o Teaching you relaxation techniques (e.g., deep breathing, muscle relaxation, visualization) that you can practice and use to feel more calm and relaxed.
  - o Helping you create an "Action Plan" with goals you can work toward in order to be active and engaged in life.
  - o Providing you with an opportunity to talk about your symptoms and experiences and exploring how best to manage what is bothering you.
  - o Assisting you in communicating with other medical team members about your symptoms, if this is helpful to you.