

Coping with Cancer



The stress response is a complex action linked to changes in our hormones and nervous system that affects the mind, body, spirit, and emotions. We know that this response can become a long-term problem that puts us at risk for health problems and disease. But it doesn't have to be that way. Stress can also drive you to seek help, resolve issues, practice forgiveness, and find inner peace.

Stress is a common and normal response to cancer. Let's look at some of the aspects of cancer linked to stress. Then we'll focus on things you can do to help cope with stress and find mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual peace.

The fears that come with cancer

There are many reasons why stress levels shoot up at the mere mention of the word cancer. Cancer is scary. There are many fears linked to this disease, including:

Fear of the unknown

Many questions may go through your mind when a healthcare provider diagnoses you with cancer: What kind of cancer is it? Why did this happen to me? Will I die from it? How long do I have to live? Can it be treated? Fear of the unknown can either drive you to ask questions and learn more, or it may paralyze you.

You can work through the fear of the unknown. Talk with your cancer treatment team. Ask questions. Take notes. Ask where you can learn more. Are there websites you can trust? Books you can read? Seek answers but try to not become overwhelmed with too much information.

Fear of isolation

The initial shock of a cancer diagnosis may make you feel alone and helpless. Other people, in their own fear, may withdraw, adding to your feelings of isolation. But you can overcome this by finding a treatment team you feel good about and talking about your feelings. Support groups are another great way to work through fear.

Fear of failure

One of the first decisions you may face is choosing treatment. Your team may talk with you about different choices and ask you to decide. What if you make the wrong choice? What if it doesn't work? Talking with family and friends can help. You might also find that getting a second opinion helps you feel better about making the decision that's best for you.

This fear might also show up, often as guilt, if you seem to make little or no progress during treatment. Again, talk with the experts on your team about what you should expect and how you'll know if treatment is working. Be sure you understand the goal of treatment. Is it to cure the cancer? Control it? Help with the problems it's causing? Try to take an active role in your own health. Try to manage fear by learning as much as you can to make decisions that are right for you.

Fear of death and dying

This fear is common when facing your own (or a loved one's) mortality. It may be linked to unresolved issues that you need to address, concerns about the people you'll leave behind, or fear of the dying process. Will you suffer? Have pain?

In our culture, many people still consider death a taboo subject, and it's often difficult to talk about it. But there are steps you can take to be in control and prepare for the worst. Making peace with yourself and your loved ones is the first step in facing your fear. Taking care of the legal issues can also help you feel more peaceful and make things easier for the people you love. Make a will, write letters, make a list of passwords, accounts, and investments. Also talk with your healthcare team and your family about the treatments you do and don't

want. An advance directive is a great way to make sure your healthcare wishes are known should there come a time when you can't express them yourself. Do things you really enjoy and spend time with the people you love.

Signs of stress

Stress from cancer develops in many different ways. You (and your caregivers) may feel overwhelmed, hopeless, angry, sad, and helpless. Feelings like these are normal and may come and go over time. Here are some of the more common symptoms of stress. If they impact your daily life or keep getting worse, ask your treatment team for help.

Body

At first, stress can energize you. But when you don't get enough rest, stress can drain your energy. You might feel extreme tiredness (fatigue). On-again, off-again fatigue may turn into constant lethargy that can make it hard to do your daily activities. Headaches, allergies, muscle tension, and stomach or bowel problems may arise. Stress can and does cause wear and tear on the body.

Mind

Mental stress ranges from boredom to feeling completely overwhelmed. Sensory overload (too much information) can confuse your thinking. Confusion, memory problems, and poor decision-making can result from mental stress.

Emotions

There's a wide range of stressful emotions. Anything from anger, impatience, fear, frustration, guilt, anxiety, resentment, and hopelessness can result. Left unresolved, these emotions can pull you into a downward spiral of depression.

Spirit

Your spirit relates to your beliefs and values about what makes life worthwhile. It's often connected to beliefs and meaning. It might be linked to a higher power or sense of connection with a force beyond yourself. Cancer can have a huge impact on your spirit. The stress it causes can affect the 3 pillars of human spirituality: relationships, values, and life purpose.

Current research suggests that the mind and body are really 1 entity, not 2 separate parts. In other words, there's no separation or division between the mind, body, spirit, and emotions. So try to tend to your spiritual health, too. This may mean reading spiritual writings, spending time in nature, meditating or praying, or using a journal to express your thoughts and feelings.

Managing cancer stress

There are hundreds of ways to cope with stress. The goal of each is to replace your anxiety and stress with peace and a sense of calmness. Here are some ideas for coping with stress:

Support groups



Find a support group of people who live near you and are coping with cancer. Your healthcare team may be able to make some suggestions. Online support groups can also be a great way to meet and draw support and encouragement from people coping with cancer.

Research shows that people who belong to a support group are better able to cope with the stress of their disease. Online support groups are a good start. But actually meeting with people and sitting down to talk about problems, issues, and concerns can be emotionally healing. Support groups provide comfort, boost morale, and provide information. They're a great way to learn from others as you cope with cancer.

Therapeutic humor (comic relief)

Anger and fear are normal (and even healthy, in small amounts). But they're not healthy when left unresolved for long periods of time. Unresolved emotions can actually suppress your immune system. Humor therapy uses the power of laughter and smiles to help you manage stress.

Studies show that laughter can change chemicals in the brain and may even boost the immune system. Humor can provide a break from the worries and concerns that are often linked to cancer.

Massage therapy

Muscle tension is the number 1 symptom of stress, regardless of the stressor. Massage therapy can help reduce muscle and emotional tension. There are many different types of massage, such as Swedish, sports massage, myofascial release, rolfing, and craniosacral. Talk with your treatment team about the style that's best for you.

Someone on your healthcare team or in your support group may be able to recommend a place where you can get a massage.

Complementary and integrative medicine

Complementary and integrative medicine are treatments that are not part of usual medical care but are used *along with* standard medical treatment. The field of complementary and integrative medicine is loaded with many forms of healing. The purpose of all of them is to help the health and well-being of your mind, body, spirit, and emotions. Talk with your healthcare team before using complementary or integrative medicine methods.

Meditation

Self-talk, stillness, and focus can work very well to quiet your mind and relax your body. It's been found to help reduce chronic pain, lower blood pressure, lower stress hormones, and improve mood. For instance, studies show that prayer can help you find peace of mind and spiritual healing. It helps you to feel connected to a larger universe. Repeating words or phrases can also clear your mind and reduce stress. Meditation can be self-taught or guided by others. It's safe and anyone can do it.

Healthy nutrition

The connection between diet and health can't be overstated. There's a flood of special diets on the market that claim to improve health. But simply eating balanced meals helps keep your immune system healthy, gives you energy, and helps you heal. Still, it can be very hard to eat well when you're coping with cancer. Here are some tips:

- Eat more vegetables and fruits. Try juices, purees, and smoothies.
- Eat lower-fat, high-protein foods. Chicken and fish are full of protein. Low-fat milk and cheeses, nuts, and soy foods are other good protein sources.
- Remember to stay hydrated. Water and fluids are vital to health. This can be extra important if you're losing fluids through vomiting or diarrhea. Eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day is the goal for most people. Talk to your treatment team about how much you should aim for.

Cancer and treatments can change the way you eat. They can make you not want to eat and change the way your body uses and tolerates food. Talk with your healthcare team about any eating problems you have.

Dietary supplements

Many people with cancer think about taking herbs, vitamins, and other supplements. They also find that people around them recommend certain products. While some may be safe, others may not. And some can cause harm by interfering with surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation. It's very important that you talk with your healthcare team before starting any kind of supplement. They can help you make safe choices.

The bottom line

There's no doubt that cancer can be very stressful. But it's possible for you to find peace, balance, and comfort through some of the ideas covered here. And there are many more choices out there.

Be sure to talk with your cancer treatment team about any problems or concerns you have. Good cancer care means taking care of your whole body, mind, and spirit. Your care team can help you cope with the changes that come with cancer.

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