

Coping with Cancer Stress: Skills for Patients and Caregivers

Cancer patients and families often ask:

How can I cope with this stress?

Cancer can be a stressful journey. Feelings of sadness, fear, and anger are normal. Your feelings might change from moment to moment and day to day.

Practicing ways to cope with stress will keep feelings more level and hopeful. Better stress control will likely improve both your outlook and relations with other family members. Here are ways to cope that may be helpful for you and your family.

Take care of the basics in healthy ways — eating, exercise, resting

- *Eat healthy* to keep up your strength to cope with cancer. This includes:
 - Eating at least 5 servings of fruits and vegetables every day.
 - Having healthy snacks with protein, such as nuts, yogurt, and cheese.
 - Drinking 8 to 10 glasses of water or other drinks without caffeine each day. If you have heart or kidney problems, ask your doctor or nurse how much you can drink. If you're not sure how to eat healthy, ask your nurse or doctor for a referral to a dietician.



- *Get regular exercise.* This will boost your energy and lower stress.
 - Walk 10 to 15 minutes each day. Do more if you can.
 - If it's hard to leave the house, use an exercise DVD.
 - If your doctor says it's OK, try yoga, biking, or other activities you enjoy.
- *Get healthful rest and sleep.*
 - Create a bedtime routine that helps you fall asleep and stay asleep. This includes going to bed at the same time each night and getting up about the same time each morning, even on weekends. Relax before

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bedtime by reading, bathing, or listening to quiet music — whatever works to soothe you.

— If you drink coffee, tea, or soda with caffeine, drink them just in the morning.

— If you drink alcohol, don't drink in the 3 hours before bedtime.

Alcohol may put you to sleep, but you will probably wake up after just a few hours.

— If you nap during the day, set a one hour limit. Then do something active.

Try different ways to relieve anxious feelings.

- *Talk with others who are close, such as family and friends.* Often, just sharing heavy feelings can lighten the load. When you share your emotions, you are not being a burden. Your family and friends care about you and may be waiting for you to tell them how you feel.

- *Write your feelings down.* Keep a notebook of your feelings and thoughts. And don't worry about spelling and writing mistakes. This is just for you. It can help you understand yourself better and may help you feel a greater sense of control.

- *Join a support group.* A cancer support group offers the chance to talk with others who are in or have been in a similar situation. It can help you feel less alone. Group members can listen to your concerns, and you can listen to theirs. You may be able to join a group



at your cancer treatment center or online. Learn about online groups here: www.CancerCare.org

- *Talk with a counselor.* When coping with a difficult illness, it's often helpful to talk with a trained professional counselor. This might be a social worker, nurse, psychologist, psychiatrist, or clergy. If you're not sure who could help, ask your nurse or doctor for a referral.

- *Remember to take each day as it comes, one day at a time.* Focus just on what you need to do today. Break projects up into small parts. This will help prevent you from feeling overwhelmed.

Try different ways to relax.

- *Experiment with ways to create a calm feeling inside you.* Some use meditation. Others use prayer, music,

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art, or nature to create a sense of calmness. Books and CDs can help you learn different calming techniques.

- *Practice muscle and breathing relaxation techniques each day.* If you have never tried this, here are some basic directions. It's easy to do with just a little practice. You might also want to try using a relaxation CD to help you.
 - Sit in a comfortable chair or lie down on your bed. Close your eyes and breathe deeply.
 - Tense and then relax each part of your body. Start with your toes and work your way up to your head.
 - Once your body is relaxed, think of a pleasant place or experience. Enjoy feeling relaxed and happy.

Do activities that you enjoy and bring you pleasure.

To keep from feeling that your life is only about having cancer, take time each day to do things you enjoy. Pace yourself to balance being active without overdoing it. You might continue to enjoy:

- *Hobbies.* If you have hobbies you love, try to figure out how you can modify them to fit your energy and keep doing them. For example, if you love to garden, perhaps you can grow plants indoors. If you love golf or tennis, perhaps you can enjoy games on TV.
- *Books or movies.* If you like to read, this might be your chance. Try reading books or watching movies that make you laugh. Humor can lighten up your life and help you forget worries.



- *Spending time with people you enjoy.* Friends and family can bring feelings of support, joy, and even peace into your life.
- *Nature.* Watching the outside world can help relax your mind and restore your energy. Depending on the weather, you might sit outside and look at the trees or flowers. Or, visit a park and watch birds. Or, take a walk. If you're stuck inside, you can always gaze out a window and perhaps put a bird feeder close by. Enjoy nature at least 3 times a week for about 30 minutes each visit.

Try to find meaning and purpose in your life.

Some cancer patients find that their illness causes them to reflect on what is most important in their lives. For some,

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the search for meaning is an important part of their cancer journey. Some find how much they value and love their family. Others find meaning by focusing on the simple things in life.

Each person is different. Each person decides whether to try to find meaning in their illness and what this meaning might be. You might discover ways that you have grown or benefited from your cancer experience.

It's a chance to think about:

- What you value most
- What your priorities are
- If you want support from your religious or spiritual community

When should I get help?

Be sure to ask your health care team for help if you are not coping with cancer stress. Asking for help is not shameful and does not mean you are weak. It just means you need help. Ask for it if:

- You feel overwhelmed and are having trouble caring for yourself
- You are using alcohol or other drugs to help you cope
- You are thinking about hurting or killing yourself
- You would like a referral to a trained counselor such as a social worker, mental health nurse, psychologist or psychiatrist.



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This fact sheet contains general information and is not meant to replace consultation with your doctor or nurse.

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