

Coping During Treatment

How to handle anxiety and depression

This handout explains anxiety and depression, both of which are common responses to the stress of having treatment for cancer.

Anxiety

Most people feel anxious when facing a new or stressful situation. We all feel worried at times in our day-to-day lives.

You may feel nervousness, tension, panic, fear, or as though something bad is going to happen. Anxiety can also show up as physical symptoms such as upset stomach, sweaty palms, fast heartbeat, shaking, or flushed face.

It is normal to feel anxious when facing a life-threatening illness and its treatment. But there are things you can do to help lessen the feelings of anxiety.

What are the signs of anxiety?

Tell your doctor or nurse if you have:

- Feelings of dread or fear that last for several days.
- Physical symptoms such as sweaty palms, shaking, and rapid heartbeat. These symptoms might also be side effects of treatment.
- Wide mood swings that you cannot control.

What can I do for myself?

Even though you can lessen anxiety, it is not likely that all your anxiety will go away. Your goals are to:

- Learn how to cope with anxiety.
- Get professional help when needed.

Learn How to Cope

- Try to understand what thoughts trigger your anxiety. For example, if you are anxious about a medical procedure, ask yourself what it is about the procedure that is upsetting. Then ask yourself how you would change the procedure so it doesn't make you so anxious. Talk with staff about what you need. We may be able to make changes that will help.

- Getting the facts can help. For example, if you are worried about pain or discomfort, ask your doctor or nurse how to manage these things.
- To help reduce anxiety:
 - Think about doing things that are pleasant and relaxing.
 - Learn ways to relax, such as meditation, mindfulness, or visualization.
 - Refer to the grounding exercise on page 4 of this handout.

Get Professional Help

It is normal to feel anxiety during cancer treatment. If your anxiety does not improve even when you try different coping methods, ask your doctor, nurse, or social worker to connect you with a mental health professional. It is OK to ask for help.

Depression

Many emotions arise when you are dealing with a life-threatening illness. Some patients have feelings such as helplessness, despair, and sadness during treatment. Symptoms of depression can also include loss of appetite, changes in sleep, lack of energy, and having a hard time focusing.

If you have had symptoms of depression or have been on antidepressants in the past, be sure to tell your doctor, nurse, or social worker.

What are the signs of depression?

Tell your doctor or nurse if you:

- Feel sad most of the time for several days.
- Have feelings that interfere with your ability to care for yourself.
- Have thoughts about hurting yourself.
- Have mood swings that you cannot control.

What can I do for myself?

- Know that it is normal to have feelings of sadness at times.
- Let yourself feel sad at times.
- Get professional help when needed.

Let Yourself Feel Sad at Times

- Talk about your feelings with someone who listens, such as a family member.
- Talk with other patients in your situation, such as people in support groups.
- Use your spiritual resources, such as a chaplain or religious group.

Get Professional Help

Psychiatrists and psychologists can:

- Assess the cause of your depression (it may be a side effect of some of your medicines).
- Prescribe medicine to manage your depression.
- Refer you to a counselor.

Ask your doctor, nurse, or social worker to connect you with a psychiatrist or psychologist.

How We Can Help

Social Work

A social worker can meet with you and your loved ones during your treatment at the University of Washington Medical Center. Talk to your provider or member of your healthcare team about meeting with a social worker for a treatment support planning visit.

Social workers can talk with you about:

- Emotional support for patients and loved ones, caregiving options, resources to help your quality of life, legal documents and issues, financial and insurance information and resources, and support services.

Supportive and Palliative Care Services

Palliative care is a special kind of healthcare. It focuses on easing the symptoms and stress of a serious illness. The goal is to improve the quality of life for patients, families, and caregivers.

Palliative care is for anyone with a serious illness. It is not based on the patient's age or stage of illness. Palliative care can be provided to patients with cancer while they are getting active treatment including chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and immunotherapy.

If you want to talk with a provider from Supportive and Palliative Care Services, talk with your care team. A member of your team can assist with placing a referral to Palliative Care Services.

Grounding Exercise

One practice that can be helpful when you are experiencing uncomfortable symptoms of anxiety is the “5-4-3-2-1” technique. This technique is a type of *grounding exercise*, which can help connect you to the present moment and bring feelings of calm.

“5-4-3-2-1” uses each of your 5 senses to redirect your focus from the source of your anxiety to the present moment.

Begin by taking deep breaths in through your nose and then slowly exhaling through your mouth. While continuing to breathe deeply, notice the following:

- **5 things you can see.** Look around you. What do you see? Look for objects you haven't noticed before. You may observe patterns of light on the ground or watch the weather changing outside.
- **4 things you can feel.** Bring your attention to the different textures and surfaces around you. Notice the weight of your clothes on your body or how your feet feel in your shoes. Some people find it helpful to run their hands under tap water for a few seconds, alternating between cool and warm temperatures.
- **3 things you can hear.** Focus on what you can hear around you. Notice sounds like the buzz of nearby traffic, the hum of a fan, or maybe the wind rustling through the trees. If you have headphones, you can put them on and play calming music.
- **2 things you can smell.** Think about familiar smells you find soothing. Do you have a favorite scented candle you can light, or a fragrant hand lotion you can apply? Notice the smells around you, like newly cut grass or the aroma of a hot cup of tea or coffee.
- **1 thing you can taste.** What is something that you can easily taste? Consider chewing a piece of gum, taking a sip of a flavored beverage, or letting a mint slowly dissolve on your tongue.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Ask your doctor or healthcare provider to connect you with a social worker who can help answer your questions or concerns.

Your provider or social worker's name and number:
