

Tip Sheet:

Emotional Well-Being During Cancer Treatment

Facing cancer is challenging. The disease can affect many parts of your life, and these changes can be distressing. There are many ways to help manage your emotions and feel better. We are here to support you. No one has to face cancer alone.

What You May Be Feeling

Overwhelmed.

“I’m just overwhelmed” is a common experience for patients after learning they have cancer. Thoughts are swirling in your head, and your life feels out of control. You may be wondering, “Will treatment make me feel sick? How will cancer affect my family and job? How much is this going to cost? Will I survive?”

Worried, afraid, anxious.

People with cancer often feel worried, nervous, and afraid, especially shortly after diagnosis or with changes in treatment. This is sometimes called anxiety. Being anxious is a common reaction to stressful situations. However, sometimes anxiety can interfere with your day-to-day activities, decision making, and ability to follow your treatment plan.

Sad or depressed.

You may feel a sense of loss about your health and the plans you had before being diagnosed. This sadness may take time to lessen or go away. If you have intense sadness that lasts for two weeks or more or is interfering with your daily life, you may have clinical depression. Signs include feeling hopeless, worthless, withdrawn, unfocused, nervous, and with very low-energy. This is a treatable illness. If you are thinking about hurting yourself or suicide (taking your own life), immediately call 911 or go to your local emergency room.

Angry or frustrated.

You may feel angry that you have cancer and wonder, “Why me?” You may also feel angry or resentful toward your healthy friends and family. If you are religious, you may even be angry with God. It’s understandable to feel frustrated by everything you have to deal with, such as treatment decisions, financial issues, and changes to work and family schedules.

Guilty.

It’s common to feel guilty that your illness is upsetting loved ones. You may worry that you are a burden. Or you may blame yourself for lifestyle choices that could have contributed to your cancer. Sometimes patients have guilt feelings about decisions they make about work, treatment, or getting help.

Lonely.

You may feel alone in your experiences, as friends and loved ones may not understand what you’re going through. Some people may avoid you because they don’t know what to say or find cancer upsetting. Or, you may not feel healthy enough for activities you usually enjoy.

What you can do

There is no right or wrong way to feel during cancer. How you cope may depend on your personality and the values you grew up with – for example, your faith or your comfort in asking for help. Do what’s right for you, and try not to compare yourself to others.

Some people try to manage their distress with risky behaviors like smoking, drinking alcohol, or misusing drugs. These can affect your treatment and overall health. We recommend safer ways here.

Take control

People with cancer usually feel better when they take some action.

- Sort out your feelings. Identify what is making you feel worried, sad, or angry.
- Decide how much medical information you want. If it feels comfortable, ask your care team about your treatment options, expected response, side effects, and services available to help you. Some people feel less afraid when they know what to expect about their illness and treatment.
- Think about how much information you want to share with friends, family, and coworkers, and how you might answer people’s questions.

Talk with others

Try not to be alone with your thoughts and worries. Talk with your Dana-Farber care team. You might also talk with a mental health counselor (social worker, psychiatrist, psychologist, etc.), friends and family, other patients in a support group, or a chaplain or other spiritual adviser.

Keep a journal

If you’re feeling overwhelmed, try writing down what’s on your mind. Writing may allow you to reflect on experiences and let go of some negative thoughts.

Stay busy

Don’t spend 100 percent of your time on cancer. Do things you enjoy. Examples include walking, seeing friends, listening to music, pursuing a hobby, or working.

Take care of yourself

- Try relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, or yoga. Or try other integrative therapies to ease your cancer symptoms, such as acupuncture, massage therapy, tai chi, or Reiki.
- Get regular exercise.
- Maintain a healthy diet.
- Get help with physical changes from your cancer and treatment (hair loss, scars, weight changes, etc.) that affect how you feel about yourself.
- Decide which tasks and activities are most important and say “no” to others that seem less important now.
- Ask for and accept help from family, friends, or coworkers with tasks such as shopping, cooking, and childcare.

Stay hopeful.

There are many ways to build your sense of hope. For example, continue regular activities, reflect on your spiritual beliefs, or think about the positive things in your life. Consider the personal strengths that helped you meet challenges in the past. Being hopeful is different from being cheerful and happy. Don't pretend to be upbeat if you are not. It's OK to have a bad day.

Consider medication

You may benefit from taking a prescription medication if you have anxiety or depression that interferes with your daily life. Your cancer care team can recommend the most appropriate medicine or refer you to a mental health professional.

Resources at Dana-Farber

Counseling

Dana-Farber clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists work with our medical providers to address the emotional and mental health needs of patients and, in some cases, family members. We provide support around anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. We can also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call **617-632-3301**.

Peer support

- Dana-Farber offers many support groups and can help find one in your community. For details, visit www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups or call **617-632-3301**.
- **One-to-One** is a free telephone-based program that connects Dana-Farber patients and families with trained volunteers who have experienced cancer. Call **617-632-4020** or visit www.dana-farber.org/onetoone.
- **SoulMates** is a program that connects new breast cancer patients with survivors who faced a similar diagnosis. Call **617-632-6501** or visit www.dana-farber.org/soulmates.

Spiritual care

Chaplains from many faiths provide spiritual guidance and counseling. Our chapel, located on the second floor of the Yawkey Center, is also open for reflection and prayer. Call **617-632-5778**, email DFCISpiritualCare@dfci.harvard.edu, or visit www.dana-farber.org/spirituality.

Integrative therapies

The Leonard P. Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies and Healthy Living offers individual sessions in acupuncture, massage, reflexology, and Reiki, and free group programs in exercise/movement, meditation, and music and art therapy. Visit www.dana-farber.org/zakim, email zakim_center@dfci.harvard.edu, or call **617-632-3322**.

Exercise classes and consults

Dana-Farber's exercise specialist supports cancer patients and survivors who want to improve their fitness. To learn more or set up a free consult, call **617-632-4523** or visit www.dana-farber.org/exercise.



Nutrition

Our registered dietitians help cancer patients and survivors make healthy choices around foods, vitamins, and herbal supplements. Call **617-632-3006** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/nutrition**.

Friends' Place

Friends' Place is a specialty store on the first floor of the Yawkey Center that offers hats, wigs, scarves, prostheses, and more to help patients address physical changes that can result from cancer treatment. Call **617-632-2211** or visit **www.dana-farber.org/friendsplace**.

Blum Patient and Family Resource Center

The Blum Center, on the first floor of the Yawkey Center, is a comfortable place to learn more about cancer and its treatment. Stop by, call **617-632-5570**, or visit **www.dana-farber.org/resourcecenter**.

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.