



## Mental Health & Cancer

After a cancer diagnosis, you are likely paying more attention to your body and the physical and emotional changes that you may be experiencing. You may notice different feelings and emotions that are new and impact your quality of life. In 2022, about 60% of patients and caregivers screened by CSC's Cancer Support Helpline expressed feelings of sadness or fear. These feelings are normal and there are things you can do to lessen their impact on your life.

After your diagnosis and throughout your treatment, your care team, family, and friends may ask how you are feeling and if you have any pain or discomfort. This is because your physical health is important. Though it may be talked about less, your mental health is equally important. Mental health refers to your overall emotional, psychological, social and financial well-being. A cancer diagnosis is a major change for the person receiving it as well as those who care about them. This news can have an impact on your emotions, thoughts, and experiences. In this fact sheet, we will explore the importance of staying in touch with your feelings and how to work through emotional changes.

Caring for your mental health has a direct impact on your overall physical health. According to Cancer Support Community's **2020 Cancer Experience Registry Report**, 49% of respondents were at risk for clinically significant levels of anxiety and 38% were at risk for clinically significant levels of depression. This tells us that emotional distress is common in response to a cancer diagnosis. We also know that these challenges can be managed effectively with the right kinds of support.

### **CANCER SUPPORT HELPLINE**

The Cancer Support Community offers free navigation for cancer patients or their loved ones by phone and online. The Helpline provides guidance, resources and support with a variety of needs. Helpline navigators can get information about cancer, identify a local support group, or just be someone to listen. We provide help with coping in over 200 languages. **Call 888-793-9355** or speak to a navigator online at **[CancerSupportCommunity.org/Helpline](https://CancerSupportCommunity.org/Helpline)**.

## KEY TERMS

Below are some key terms that are important for you to understand and that your health care team may discuss with you.

**Anxiety** is a feeling of uneasiness, worry, or fear that usually occurs because of stress. Anxiety can have physical sensations as well, such as feeling tense or like your heart is racing.

**Distress** is an unpleasant state that can affect how you think, feel, and act. Distress can include different emotions like fear, sadness, anger, and worry.

**Grief** is the emotional response to loss. Grief can arise from loss of many different things, such as the loss of a person, loss of health, or the loss of control.

**Stress** is how the body responds to pressure like specific events, trauma, and illness. Stress can cause changes in both our physical and emotional well-being. Everyone responds to stress differently.

**Depression** is a diagnosed condition. It causes a persistent feeling of sadness or loss of interest in things you once enjoyed.

While some degree of each of these reactions is normal following a cancer diagnosis, it is important to know when it's time to ask for help. If you feel that you are consistently feeling distressed, are not doing the things you enjoy, or you are not having moments of relief, it is time to seek help.

Being aware and in-tune with your emotions is a good place to start. Think about how you are feeling, and how you would like to feel. Think about what challenges you are currently facing in that moment and what or who you can reach out to for support and assistance. There may not be an exact moment where you realize you are experiencing these feelings but tracking how you feel over time can be helpful. Many people find journaling helpful, but tracking can be as simple as making notes on a calendar.

Levels of stress and anxiety will change over time. Some days you may not have any feelings of stress or anxiety related to your diagnosis. Other days may be really difficult. Anniversaries or other milestones can bring up feelings of loss or grief. The uncertainty of waiting for test results or “scanxiety” can be particularly uncomfortable. All these feelings are valid and normal to experience.

## THE NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

This is the dialing code for the U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Those in the U.S. can call, text, or chat 988 to connect with trained counselors. This is free and confidential support for those in suicidal crisis or emotional distress. Visit [988lifeline.org](https://www.988lifeline.org) for more information.

Individuals in Canada can call the Suicide Prevention Service at 833-456-4566 or text 45645 between 4pm and midnight to connect with a crisis responder. These are free resources for mental health and crisis support.



Refer to Cancer Support Community's **page on scanxiety** for additional information and tips for how to manage this type of emotion.

You may find it helpful to connect back to your coping skills during these times. Examples are to take slow and deep breaths or to recognize how you feel mentally and physically through mindfulness. Feelings of stress and anxiety can re-surface at different times, even when it may not make sense. It is important to be aware of your feelings and take steps to help cope or manage these feelings through support sources or participating in activities that you enjoy. Maintaining support, whether that be from someone else such as a therapist or from engaging in activities you love, is an important aspect to carry with you throughout and beyond cancer treatment.

If these feelings of stress, anxiety, or sadness are persistent, it is important to ask for help. A good rule of thumb is if these feelings last for more than two weeks in a row, connect with your support system and care team to let them know how you are feeling.

At the same time, know that no level of stress or anxiety is too small to ask for help. Talk to your care team about how you are feeling so that they can help connect you with a mental health provider.

If you were diagnosed with a mental health condition before your cancer diagnosis, share this with your care providers. The increased stress of a cancer diagnosis may impact how you manage your mental health condition and vice versa. Working with your cancer care team and your mental health professionals early on can help you develop coping mechanisms.

Your cancer care team is there to support your mental health, along with your physical health needs. Specific care team members are there to help you work through the feelings that frequently come up after diagnosis, during treatment, and afterwards. These team members may include:

**Social Workers:** A social worker can provide support with emotional needs and help you find community resources, like therapists or support groups. In some cancer centers, social workers may hold support groups or offer short-term counseling.

**Psychologists, Therapists, and Counselors:** These professionals are specially trained to support people and their emotional, behavioral, and social concerns. A psychologist or therapist on your care team may provide brief support or therapy to you and your loved ones or refer you to one in the community. It may be helpful to find a mental health professional who specializes in cancer.

**Chaplains:** This person is a member of the clergy who can provide religious and spiritual support.

The members of your care team can also assist in helping you find any additional mental health support services that might be helpful.



During cancer treatment, you may be asked questions about distress. Your team may ask directly or as a part of your paperwork. This is called distress screening and is a way that health care professionals can quickly see how you are doing and what resources you may need for the feelings invisible through physical observation. Distress screening typically happens multiple times throughout your cancer treatment at different milestones. This helps your team monitor your emotions and needs over time.

## MENTAL HEALTH STIGMA

Stigma is the term used to describe the perceived negative feelings people have toward a situation or condition. For example, it may be considered taboo in your culture to talk about sadness, loneliness, or anxiety. Stigma can prevent people from talking about their experiences and receiving the help they need. It may also prevent people from seeking out help early on. Just like your physical health, the sooner you get help for your mental health, the better.

You cannot change other people's thoughts, but you can take control of your own experience. Here are some tips to coping with stigma:

- Create a support network of people who you trust and who understand you
- Educate people about the benefits of talking openly and honestly about mental health
- Try to set aside your own doubts or stigma about mental health treatment. Try talking with a mental health provider and decide for yourself if it is helpful for you

- Find trusted resources such as the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

Getting help from therapists and other professionals is a brave step that can improve your quality of life. You are not alone. Help is available.



## CAREGIVER MENTAL HEALTH

Caregivers are also at risk for distress after a loved one's cancer diagnosis. Caregiver burnout is exhaustion due to managing the responsibilities of caring for someone. While supporting someone going through cancer, caregivers must also take time to care for themselves. As a caregiver, it is not selfish to think about your own needs. Create your own support network to help you. You are also experiencing the stress and unknowns of a cancer diagnosis. Recognize when you are beginning to feel burnt out. You may have persistent feelings of anxiety, sadness, or anger. The care team can help connect you to mental health support. Consider joining a caregiver support group or ask about one-on-one therapy in-person or online to meet you when and where you need.







## **MENTAL HEALTH AND CANCER RESOURCES**

**Cancer Support Helpline®** — Have questions, concerns or looking for resources? Call CSC’s toll-free Cancer Support Helpline (888-793-9355), available in 200 languages Mon-Thurs 11am-8pm ET and Fri 11am-6pm ET.

**Cancer Support Community** · 1-888-793-9355 · [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org)

**National Alliance on Mental Illness** · 1-800-950-NAMI (6264) · [NAMI.org/Help](http://NAMI.org/Help)

**American Cancer Society** · 800-227-2345 · [www.Cancer.org](http://www.Cancer.org)

**MentalHealth.gov** · [www.MentalHealth.gov](http://www.MentalHealth.gov)

**National Alliance for Caregiving** · [www.Caregiving.org](http://www.Caregiving.org)

**National Cancer Institute** · [www.Cancer.gov/About-Cancer/Coping/Feelings](http://www.Cancer.gov/About-Cancer/Coping/Feelings)

**National Suicide Prevention Hotline (U.S.)** · 800-273-8255 or 988 (text or call)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** ·

1-800-662-HELP (4357) · [www.SAMHSA.gov](http://www.SAMHSA.gov)

## **CANADIAN MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES**

**Suicide Prevention Service (Canada)** · 833-456-4566 or text 45645

**Hope for Wellness Helpline- Canada** · 1-855-242-3310 · [www.HopeforWellness.ca](http://www.HopeforWellness.ca)

**Wellness Together Canada** · text WELLNESS to 741741  
for immediate crisis support · [www.WellnessTogether.ca](http://www.WellnessTogether.ca)



## CANCER SUPPORT COMMUNITY RESOURCES

**Cancer Support Helpline®** — Have questions, concerns or looking for resources? Call CSC's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline (888-793-9355), available in 200 languages Mon-Thurs 11am-8pm ET and Fri 11am-6pm ET.

**Open to Options®** — Preparing for your next appointment? Our trained specialists can help you create a list of questions to share with your doctor. Make an appointment by calling 888-793-9355 or by contacting your local CSC or Gilda's Club.

**Frankly Speaking About Cancer®** — Trusted information for cancer patients and their loved ones is available through publications, online, and in-person programs.

**Services at Local CSCs and Gilda's Clubs** — With the help of 170 locations, CSC and Gilda's Club network partners provide services free of charge to people touched by cancer. Attend support groups, educational sessions, wellness programs, and more at a location near you. [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/FindLocation](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/FindLocation).

**Cancer Experience Registry®** — Help others by sharing your cancer patient or cancer caregiver experience via survey at [www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org](http://www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org).

**MyLifeLine** — CSC's private, online community allows patients and caregivers to easily connect with friends and family to receive social, emotional, and practical support throughout the cancer journey and beyond. Sign up at [www.MyLifeLine.org](http://www.MyLifeLine.org).

**Grassroots Network** — Make sure your voice is heard by federal and state policy makers on issues affecting cancer patients and survivors by joining our Network at [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate).

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The Cancer Support Community and its partners provide this information as a service. This publication is not intended to take the place of medical care or the advice of your doctor. We strongly suggest consulting your doctor or other health care professionals to answer questions and learn more.

This publication is available to download and print yourself at [www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Coping-Mental-Health-Concerns](http://www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Coping-Mental-Health-Concerns). For print copies of this publication or other information about coping with cancer, visit [Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org](http://Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org).

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