



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancerca.org  
www.cancerca.org

# ANXIETY AND CANCER

**Anxiety (worry) is a natural feeling when you or a loved one is affected with a cancer diagnosis; it can make you feel out of control and overwhelmed. Our bodies have a flight, fight or freeze response, and when we perceive a threat to our personal well-being, our life or a loved one's life, this mechanism is triggered, and we choose to engage the threat or flee from it. Chronic anxiety can lead to fatigue and depression over time, so it is important to find stress-relieving techniques that work for you.**

## RECOGNIZING CHANGE

Periods of anxiety following a cancer diagnosis are natural. But have those thoughts become patterns? Are they overwhelming you?

If so, ask yourself the following questions:

- What situation or event triggered automatic negative thoughts or negative self-talk (e.g. negative statements about myself)?
- What is the evidence for this negative thought?
- Am I looking at both sides of the issue?

Then counter those negative thoughts with three alternative positive, self-supportive statements.

In addition to practicing this simple exercise, talking with a loved one, social worker or your health care team can help you find ways to cope.

## COPING WITH ANXIETY

There are some steps you can take to minimize anxiety, which can include the following:

**Talk to your health care team.** It's important to let your health care team know about any changes, whether they are emotional or physical. Members of your health care team can also provide resources to help you cope with the emotional impact of cancer.



**Engage in physical activity.** Exercise improves fitness and strengthens your ability, in both mind and body, to cope with cancer. It may be best to start small, especially if you are experiencing fatigue. There are plenty of small changes that can be made to increase your physical activity. Walking is a gentle way to get into exercising. You may want to start by walking 5 to 10 minutes and build from there. Keep in mind that you should talk with your doctor before starting any type of exercise.

**Practice mind-body-spirit techniques.** Mind-body-spirit techniques, such as yoga, meditation, visualization, tai chi, chi gong, prayer and singing are practices that help restore our bodies, calm our minds and reignite our hope during stress-filled days. Many hospitals and cancer centers now provide information on these techniques and groups in which to practice. For more information, read our "Cancer and Yoga" and "Relaxation Techniques and Mind/Body Practices" fact sheets.

## Here's a simple breathing exercise that you can try.

- Sitting down, place one hand on your chest and the other over your navel.
- Take three breaths and observe your breathing. For most people, the chest area tends to rise more than the abdomen.
- Now, take in a deep breath and extend your abdomen. Picture your lungs as long, narrow balloons, filling up from the end to the front, and from the bottom to the top.
- Hold the breath and silently count to five; then, exhale loudly.
- Do this for three breaths and then sit quietly for a moment. If you feel lightheaded, hold the next breath for a shorter time. Most people find there is a calming feeling that follows.

If breathing exercises are not helpful and you feel as though you are panicking, a grounding technique would be a useful tool to help reduce some of your anxiety:

## This somatic grounding technique may be a useful tool.

- Name 5 things you can see. Breathe.
- Name 4 things you can hear. Breathe.
- Name 3 things you can smell. Breathe.
- Name 2 things you can taste. Breathe.
- Name 1 thing you can touch. Breathe.

**Join a support group.** A support group provides a chance to meet and interact with other people who can understand your experience. Building a support network can lessen the isolation that often comes with cancer diagnosis. A support group is a unique opportunity to connect with others impacted by cancer. CancerCare provides support groups online, over the phone and face to face. We offer 100 online support groups each year for people living with specific cancer diagnoses, caregivers and the bereaved. These groups are password-protected and moderated by an oncology social worker.

**Seek counseling.** Feeling stressed or anxious while coping with cancer is common. Face-to-face or telephone counseling provides a safe space to voice any concerns to better cope with these changes. An oncology social worker can also help find local resources and programs that fit your needs.



## CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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