

## Dealing with a cancer diagnosis



If you have been diagnosed with cancer or have completed treatment, you might be dealing with a range of different emotions. There is actually no right or wrong way to feel. Cancer is a challenging disease that needs a significant amount of coping. Some of the feelings you face might seem conflicting, they might change at different times, but rest assured that **they are all normal**. Your emotions might be different than others because people have different ways of reacting to cancer under unique circumstances and across the disease journey.

About 20-25% of patients with cancer face significant emotional distress that affects their functioning. The Psycho-Oncology Mental Health team works closely with your medical team to address emotional distress that you might face during your journey. This may include medications, individual counseling, psychotherapy, group therapy, or healing services (including music therapy or art therapy).

**You can consult the Psycho-Oncology services for more information and help. Please call direct line: 01759620, or 01-350000, ext. 5650.**

## What are the different feelings that I might experience?

- **Denial/Disbelief:** You might find it hard to believe that you have cancer or accept that this is the right diagnosis for your condition. You might feel unable to grasp all the information. You might feel numb and the whole situation may seem unreal. You might cover up how unwell or tired you are by trying to stay active even when you cannot. You might try to hide your feelings and emotions, especially from children or significant others. It might be difficult to talk to family and friends about the cancer and you might feel like you want to avoid any discussion around it. You can let your surroundings know that you prefer not to talk about it. But keep in mind that talking to significant others more openly helps you deal with it better.
- **Anger:** You might be angry about having cancer, wonder why you have developed it, or feel it is unjust to have been diagnosed with it. These feelings are normal especially when you don't feel well or feel stressed, worried, or are unsure about the future after treatment
- **Guilt/Blame:** You might try to rationalize what caused your cancer. You might blame yourself, think of something you did or did not do, or blame an external situation. Keep in mind that most of the times, it is hard to know what causes cancer as there are many factors involved. You might also worry about being a burden on your loved ones or putting them in an upsetting situation. For example you might stop asking for help or deny needing help. You might also give cues such as "you are doing too much for me". But your significant others usually feel relieved and take pleasure if they are able to help you out.
- **Demoralization/Hopelessness/Helplessness:** It is very common for patients facing cancer to lose hope or sight of any meaning in their life and not be able to look forward to better days. You might feel that your life has been taken over by the disease, there's nothing you can do, or that you are losing control. All these emotions might make you think that life is not worth living. As you know more about your condition and how to manage it, you will be able to overcome these feelings gradually.
- **Loneliness/Isolation:** Being diagnosed with cancer might make you feel like you are alone struggling with the disease. You might think others do not really understand what you are going through and might feel isolated. You might not want to talk about your feelings to avoid having a distressing conversation or sounding trivial (such as being upset about hair loss and scars). Instead, you might reassure your family and friends that you are fine even though you do not feel you are. Remember that the less you express yourself, the more you will find yourself thinking about your concerns and dealing with them alone. Being able to talk with someone can help a lot.

- **Sadness:** You might feel irritable or lose pleasure in everyday things you used to enjoy. You might also find it hard to cope with feeling that life is not going according to your plans. These feelings might be persistent or come and go.
- **Withdrawal:** Wanting some time off to be alone to adjust to your emotions is normal. Over time, you will find which ways help you cope better. But if you are feeling like you want to be alone most of the time or for long periods of time and not talk to anyone, it might be related to mood changes. Consult the Psycho-Oncology team who can advise you and help you feel better.
- **Anxiety/Uncertainty/Fear:** It is normal to feel anxious or fearful when diagnosed with cancer. You might worry about the changes cancer and its treatment will cause to your body, life, and family. You might be overwhelmed by the decisions you need to take. You might be more easily irritated, stressed, and tired, and find it harder to focus or sleep. If you have finished treatment, you might also feel anxious about cancer coming back or about the future. Talking to someone can relieve you and help you process your concerns and take decisions.

Feeling uncertain about the future can be very hard to deal with and can increase your stress. Learn more about your disease and treatment to relieve your uncertainty. Keep in mind that predicting the outcome of your treatment can be difficult. What your doctors know is how well treatment works for a majority of people, but this cannot be confirmed for every case.

- **Decreased attention/memory:** You might not be able to focus or concentrate and feel that you are more forgetful. These might be related to anxiety or mood changes and can be addressed easily.
- **Body image issues:** Changes that might happen with treatment (such as hair loss, weight loss, surgical treatments, and scars) might affect how you view yourself. They might also affect your intimate life. Readjusting to these changes will seem easier with time and as side effects of treatment start decreasing.



## How can I cope with my feelings?

Knowing how to adjust to cancer can be difficult, especially if you are not feeling well emotionally and physically. As you learn how to cope, adapting will gradually seem less challenging.

- **Talk about your feelings and concerns:** Talking about cancer with your significant others and friends can help you handle the doubts you have about the disease and improve your ability to face its difficulties. It can help you identify the cause of your concerns, solve a problem, gain sense of control, feel more at ease making decisions, and gain more support. Remember that your feelings are normal and voicing them out can help you feel better.
- **Manage every day:** If things seem very difficult to deal with at the start, try to manage the situation day by day while staying focused on the present. As time goes by, things will gradually seem easier to deal with.
  - Try to eat well everyday (if you have poor appetite or eating problems, consult your medical team).
  - If possible, get up and get dressed every day. Getting out of the house can help as well.
  - Rest as much as needed when you feel unwell.
  - Avoid delaying medical appointments.
  - Try to keep the same sleep routine (sleeping and waking up at the same times each day).
  - Give yourself permission to give in to your feelings. This will help take the pressure off holding back your emotions. You do not have to stay positive all the time.
  - Stay in contact with your significant friends.
  - Identify the symptoms you feel when you are unwell and consult your medical team about them.
  - Set small goals to achieve. This will help you achieve them more easily and keep you motivated.
  - Plan some time to do activities you enjoy, like seeing more family or friends, doing leisurely activities, or exercising with company. It can give you something to look forward to.
  - Set times for yourself when you can relax. Try to make your surroundings as comfortable as possible.
- **Stay active:** Exercise is a great way to manage stress and anxiety during and after treatment. When you feel well enough, stay active as much you can. Physical activity can help lift your mood, relieve stress, improve your energy, take your mind off worries, and improve your functionality. It can also help break the cycle of fatigue that cancer and its treatment can cause. Lack of energy leads to lack of mobility which can cause even less energy. You will notice that exercise can help you deal with the side effects of treatment

and make you feel more in control. It can also improve your sleep and appetite. Any amount of physical activity can help, even as little as 10 minutes. Try to remain active during your daily routine as well.

Having company while you are active is fun and can take your mind off cancer. Being active outdoors exposes you to beneficial light, which can also improve your mood and sleep.

- **Learn about the disease:** Knowing enough information about cancer, its treatment, and possible side effects, can help you manage its course better. It can also reduce your anxiety and help you in making essential decisions. Your medical team is the best source of information about your disease, as they know your situation. They might however not be able to answer all the questions that you might have.
- **Take control of your care:** Try to make the changes you need in your lifestyle, set schedules of things you need to do, and stay involved in your health care by keeping track of your appointments. This can help you regain a sense of control.



You can consult supportive care networks that can assist you in various aspects of living with cancer and be of great support to you and your family.

**Balsam:** Tel: 01 748574 <http://www.balsam-lb.org>

**Lebanese breast cancer foundation:** Tel: 03 338507 <http://lbcfoundation.org>