

The term “mental health” includes your emotional and psychological well-being. Your mental health guides how you handle stress, manage relationships and make decisions. Caring for your mental health is as important as caring for your physical health. In the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship’s (NCCS) 2022 State of Survivorship Survey, almost one third of cancer survivors reported experiencing depression, anxiety and/or mental health issues.

Emotions like sadness, anger or stress are normal and healthy responses to difficult life events, such as a cancer diagnosis. However, sometimes persistent feelings of sadness, stress or anxiety can be caused by a mental health disorder. **Everyone can benefit from caring for their mental health and talking to their healthcare team about how they are feeling and coping.**

WHEN TO ASK FOR HELP

The following are signs that you may need to seek additional mental health support:

- Prolonged feelings of sadness and/or anxiety
- Loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Difficulty doing daily tasks
- Irritability
- Low energy levels
- Changes in sleep or eating habits
- Difficulty concentrating
- Increase in use of drugs or alcohol
- Thoughts of harming yourself or thoughts of suicide

If you or a loved is experiencing a mental health crisis, dial 988 to talk to a trained mental health professional. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline is free, confidential and always available. For the Crisis Text Line, text HOME to 741741.

MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS

Your best resource for a diagnosis is a trained mental health professional who will make an accurate diagnosis and create a treatment plan for you. Common mental health disorders of people diagnosed with cancer are:

- **Depression**, which includes ongoing sadness and/or loss of interest in activities. Physical symptoms can include fatigue and changes in sleep and eating habits.
- **Anxiety disorders** include generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and panic disorder, which are different from everyday worries. Symptoms can include intrusive thoughts that result in persistent anxiety.

- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** may develop after someone experiences a shocking, scary or dangerous event or illness (such as cancer). Symptoms can include anxiety, nightmares, irritability, changes in mood, or intrusive thoughts. These symptoms can be triggered by things that bring up memories of pain, operations or hospitalization.

Mental health disorders can affect anyone. However, some people are more likely to experience them. Risk factors include:

- Personal or family history of mental health disorders
- History of trauma
- Limited social support
- Uncontrolled symptoms or side effects
- Financial concerns

Mental health, like physical health, is important to your overall well-being. Talk to members of your healthcare team about how you are feeling and your mental health concerns.

MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS ON THE BODY

Depression and anxiety might cause symptoms similar to the side effects of cancer and treatment: fatigue, nausea, decreased appetite, cognitive (thinking) changes and sleep problems. This makes it difficult to identify depression and anxiety disorders in people with cancer. Unaddressed mental health issues may also make it challenging to follow your treatment plan or keep medical appointments.

Long-term, unmanaged stress can suppress the immune system, decreasing the body’s ability to fight infection, and increasing the risk for serious illness like heart disease and stroke. Effects of depression and anxiety may lead people towards unhealthy behaviors to cope. Smoking and excessive drinking, for example, increase the risk of disease, including cancer.

MENTAL HEALTH AFTER CANCER TREATMENT

Years after treatment, some people struggle with sadness, anxiety, grief or guilt. Others fear the cancer may come back or get worse. Some people feel a loss of how their life was before cancer. These feelings are normal and may be stronger around check-ups and screenings. Some call this “scanxiety.” If negative feelings are interfering with your daily life, talk to your doctor.

Visit www.LLS.org/SurvivorshipWorkbook for more on mental health and to create a self-care plan. The free LLS workbook, *Navigating Life During and After a Blood Cancer Diagnosis*, is available in three versions: for adults, young adults and children/adolescents.

WHAT CAN I DO TO IMPROVE MY MENTAL HEALTH?

Start by talking to your healthcare team. You may benefit from working with a mental health professional, such as a counselor or therapist, to learn how to identify, understand and cope with emotions.

Medication can also help with symptoms of depression and anxiety. Many people with a cancer diagnosis take medication to improve these symptoms.

HOW CAN I FIND A MENTAL HEALTH PROVIDER?

Ask your doctor or insurance provider for a referral to a mental health professional. Visit www.helpstartshere.org and click “Find a Social Worker” for help in searching for local or online mental health professionals. Visit <https://aosw.org/patients-caregivers/find-an-osw-near-me/> to find an oncology social worker.

If you are uninsured, or if your co-pay for behavioral health services is high, look for a provider who offers a sliding scale or reduced-cost services to eligible patients.

HOW CAN I CARE FOR MY MENTAL WELL-BEING IN MY DAILY LIFE?

To care for your own emotional health, find an outlet for your emotions. Try:

- Journaling
- Music, drawing or painting
- Movement or exercise
- Hobbies such as reading, baking or video games
- Talking to close friends or family members
- Spending time outdoors
- Connecting with other cancer patients and survivors

Physical health affects mental health. Care for your physical health by following your treatment plan, taking medications as prescribed, eating well, sleeping well and being physically active.

Visit www.LLS.org/booklets to view *Managing Stress: How stress affects you and ways to cope*. You can also order the *Write It Out* journal.

HOW CAN I TALK TO OTHER CANCER PATIENTS AND SURVIVORS?

Limited social support and isolation are risk factors for depression and anxiety disorders. Ask your healthcare team about local and online support groups. Connecting with other people who have also experienced cancer can be very helpful. To connect with others, LLS offers:

- LLS Community: An online meeting place to talk to others and receive resources. Visit www.LLS.org/community to join.
- Weekly Online Chats: Moderated chats for patients to connect. Visit www.LLS.org/chat for more.
- *Patti Robinson Kaufmann First Connection® Program*: Peer-to-peer support program. Visit www.LLS.org/FirstConnection for more.

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Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Team

- Can you refer me to a mental health professional?
- What could I do to improve my mental health?
- Would medication to improve my mental health be appropriate for me?
- Do you know of a local or online support group I can attend?

GET ONE-ON-ONE SUPPORT

The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society's **Information Specialists** are highly trained oncology social workers and nurses who can provide information and support and connect you to our **Clinical Trial Support Center** and **Registered Dietitians**.

- Call **800.955.4572** Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. (ET)
- Visit www.LLS.org/PatientSupport

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