

Moving Beyond Cancer Treatment

Dedicated to Living after Cancer

Depression After Cancer

What is Depression?

A depressive disorder is an illness that involves the body, mood, and thoughts. It affects the way a person eats and sleeps, the way one feels about oneself, and the way one thinks about things. A depressive disorder is not the same as a passing blue mood. It is not a sign of personal weakness or a condition that can be willed or wished away. People with a depressive illness cannot merely "pull themselves together" and get better. Without treatment, symptoms can last for weeks, months, or years. Appropriate treatment, however, can help most people who suffer from depression.

Not everyone who is depressed or manic experiences every symptom. Some people experience a few symptoms, some many. Severity of symptoms varies with individuals and also varies over time.

- Persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being "slowed down"
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping
- Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain



Depression and Cancer

Depression is a disabling illness that affects about 15% to 25% of cancer patients. It affects men and women with cancer equally. People who face a diagnosis of cancer will experience different levels of stress and emotional upset. Important issues in the life of any person with cancer may include the following:

- Fear of death.
- Interruption of life plans.
- Changes in body image and self-esteem.
- Changes in social role and lifestyle.
- Money and legal concerns.

Everyone who is diagnosed with cancer will react to these issues in different ways and may not experience serious depression or anxiety.

Coping With Depression and Anxiety

After treatment, you may still feel angry, tense, or sad. For most people, these feelings go away or lessen over time. For some people though, these emotions can become more severe. The painful feelings do not get any better, and they get in the way of daily life. These people may have a medical condition called depression. For some, cancer treatment may have added to this problem by changing the way the brain works.

Talk with your doctor. If your doctor thinks that you suffer from depression, he or she may treat it or refer you to other experts. Many survivors get help from therapists who are experts in both depression and helping people recovering from cancer. Your doctor may also give you medicine to help you feel less tense.

If you find it hard to talk about your feelings, don't feel that you should have to control these feelings on your own. Getting the help you need is important for your life and your health.

The Connecticut Challenge Survivorship Clinic at Yale Cancer Center can help aid in this transition time. Once finishing your active treatment, you may feel both relieved and worried. According to Lina Chase, Social Worker for the Survivorship Clinic, the biggest concern survivors express is the fear of recurrence. Often times just having the opportunity to talk about these issues gives you the chance to have your thoughts and feeling validated. To find out more about the Survivorship Clinic, please call 203-785-CARE (2273).

Do You Need Help?

If you have any of the following signs for more than 2 weeks, talk to your doctor about treatment.

Emotional signs:

- Feelings of worry, anxiety, or sadness that don't go away
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feeling overwhelmed, out of control, or shaky
- Having a sense of guilt or feeling unworthy
- Feeling helpless or hopeless
- Feeling short-tempered or moody
- Having a hard time concentrating, or feeling scatterbrained
- Crying for long periods of time or many times each day
- Focusing on worries or problems
- Having a hard time getting certain thoughts out of your mind
- Finding it hard to enjoy everyday things, such as food or being with friends
- Finding yourself avoiding situations or things that you know are really harmless
- Thinking about hurting or killing yourself

Body changes:

- Unintended weight gain or loss not due to illness or treatment
- Sleep problems, such as not being able to sleep, having nightmares, or sleeping too much
- Racing heart, dry mouth, increased perspiration, upset stomach, diarrhea
- Physically slowing down
- Fatigue that doesn't go away, headaches, or other aches and pains

Getting Help After Your Cancer Treatment

What can you do to make yourself feel better? Try to think about how you could replace the emotional support you used to receive from your health care team, such as:

- Asking one of your nurses or doctors if you could call sometimes. This could help you stay connected and help you feel less alone. Even just knowing you can call them may help.
- Finding support services offered over the phone or Internet.
- Finding new sources of support for your recovery. Friends, family, other cancer survivors, and clergy members are a few ideas.
- Joining a cancer support group. People who have had cancer meet in groups to talk about their feelings and concerns. Besides sharing their own stories, they hear what others have gone through and how other people have dealt with the same problems they are facing. A support group may also help members of your family cope with their concerns.

