

# Coping With Depression and Cancer

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**Cancer Connections**

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**Common emotions after cancer**

**Sadness vs. Depression**

**Symptoms of Depression**

**Coping and treatment strategies**

**Positive changes after cancer?**



# Cancer....???!

- Shock
- Overwhelm
- Questions
- Answers?
- Making changes
- Learning a new language
- Rearranging your life as you start treatment
- New circumstances and/or symptoms may take a toll on body and mind



# The Rollercoaster



# Emotions and Cancer



# Common Feelings

## Fear and Worry

- You may be afraid or worried about:
  - Being in pain from cancer or treatment
  - Feeling sick or looking different
  - Taking care of your family
  - Paying your bills or keeping your job
  - Dying
- Some fears about cancer can be based on rumors or misinformation



# Stress and Anxiety

- **Extra worry, inability to relax, feeling tense. You may notice that:**
  - Your heart beats faster
  - You have headaches or muscle pains
  - You don't feel like eating. Or you eat more
  - You feel sick to your stomach or have diarrhea
  - You feel shaky, weak, or dizzy
  - You have a tight feeling in your throat and chest
  - You sleep too much or too little
  - You find it hard to concentrate
- **Stress can keep your body from healing as well as it should**

# Sadness and Depression

- **NORMAL** response to any serious illness
- **Losses**
  - Of health
  - Of life/lifestyle before illness
  - Of control
  - Of ideas about future plans
- **Common symptoms include**
  - Distraction
  - Fatigue, lethargy
  - Tearfulness
  - Lack of appetite
  - Usually improves over time





# Stages of Grief in Cancer

Not everyone may experience all stages or go through them in a particular order:

1. Denial – shock, disbelief; can be protective
2. Anger – ‘it’s not ok’
3. Bargaining – ‘If only...’ or ‘I promise to change if...’
4. Sadness and depression
5. Acceptance – of a ‘new normal’



# Denial Can be Good For You



*NILE RIVER*

*"It's always been hard for me to tell the difference between denial  
and what used to be known as hope."*

-Michael Chabon, novelist

# What is the Difference?

## Sadness vs. Depression

- **Sadness... *about something***
  - Usually triggered by an event
  - Often lessens or goes away over time
  - Does not typically affect motivation or satisfaction
- **Depression... *about everything***
  - May not be triggered by specific event
  - Affects thinking, emotions, perceptions, behaviors
  - Pervasive and chronic
  - Things seem less enjoyable, interesting, important, or worthwhile
  - May feel like being more impatient, frustrated or irritable



# 6 Ways to Tell the Difference

## Sadness and Depression

1. Can you still enjoy the things you like?
2. Are your emotions about a specific event or thing?
3. Are you eating and sleeping (somewhat) normally?\*
4. Do you experience variations in your bad mood?
5. Do you have self-critical thoughts?
6. Have you had thoughts of harming yourself?

*\*With cancer-related caveat*

# Diagnosis: Depression

At least 5 of the following persisting for at least 2 weeks:

On most days:

- A depressed or irritable mood
- A loss or decrease of pleasure or interest in most activities, including ones that had been enjoyed before
- Significant changes in weight or appetite\*
- Disturbances in falling asleep or sleeping too much\*
- Feeling slowed down in your movements or restless\*
- Feeling tired, sluggish, and having low energy\*
- Having feelings of worthless or excessive guilt
- Experiencing problems with thinking, focusing, concentration or the ability to make decisions\*
- Having thoughts of wanting to die or harm yourself



*\*With cancer-related caveat*

# Prevalence of Depression in Cancer

- Recent meta-analysis indicated rates between 8-24% (Krebber et al., 2014)
- Depends on how you measure it: substantially higher when self-reported vs. clinical interview
- Prevalence much higher compared with 4% in the general population
- Highest rates among patients with GI, brain, gynecological and hematological cancers
  - Other studies suggest higher rates among those with head/neck, pancreatic, breast and lung cancers (Massie, 2004)
- Highest in the acute phase of the disease, often decreasing afterwards
- Higher risk for younger patients due to life disruption, greater physical symptom burden, and increased likelihood of developing aggressive disease (Park, 2015)
- Gender differences?

# Some Components of Depression

## Guilt

- You may blame yourself for upsetting the people you love
- Worry about being a burden in some way
- Feeling sad/ashamed of not being able to enjoy others' positive events
- You may blame yourself for lifestyle choices that you think could have led to your cancer



*“When I start to feel guilty that I caused my illness, I think of how little kids get cancer. That makes me realize that cancer can just happen. It isn't my fault.”*

*-Becky*

# Loneliness

- You may be less able to take part in the hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- You may feel that no one understands what you're going through
- You may feel isolated from others
- Others may minimize your situation or how you feel
- You may not know anyone else who has gone through what you are going through
- You may feel loved ones mean well, but do not know what to say or how to act toward you





# Anger

- It's normal to ask, "Why me?" and be angry
- You may also feel anger or resentment towards
  - Health care providers
  - Healthy friends
  - Loved ones
  - God
- Anger often comes from feelings that are harder to show:
  - Fear, anxiety
  - Helplessness
  - Depression



- Anger can be helpful in that it may motivate you to take action

# When Depression or Anxiety Gets in the Way

## Emotional Signs:

- Feelings of sadness that don't go away
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feeling nervous or shaky
- Having a sense of guilt or feeling unworthy
- Feeling short-tempered, moody
- Feeling helpless or hopeless, as if life has no meaning
- Having a hard time concentrating, feeling scatterbrained
- Crying for long periods of time or many times each day
- Focusing on worries and problems
- No interest in the hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- Finding it hard to enjoy everyday things, such as being with family and friends
- Thinking about hurting yourself or ending your life



# When Depression or Anxiety Gets in the Way

## Physical Signs:

- 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
- Changes in energy level
- Fatigue that doesn't go away
- Headaches, other aches and pains



# The Big Question: Can Depression Hurt Me?

Yes and No. But it should be treated.

- Several recent studies have linked depression and increased mortality from cancer
- How?
  - Behavioral: Less adherence to treatment? Missed appts?
  - Biological: Stress hormone and inflammatory dysregulation response?
- But:
  - Correlation  $\neq$  causation
  - Lack of data on depression and cancer history, cancer symptoms and functional status, whether or not patients were treated for depression
  - Could associations reflect effects of cancer on mood?

# Well-Meaning but...

The image is a side-by-side comparison of two messages. The left side has a grey background and a thought bubble containing the word "cloud". The right side has a pink background and a thought bubble containing the words "Silver Lining".

**cloud**

**YOU'RE GOING TO BE JUST FINE!**

[www.TheSilverPen.com](http://www.TheSilverPen.com)  
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**I'LL BE HERE TO SUPPORT YOU DURING YOUR TREATMENT.**

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cloud

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MASTECTOMY AND  
RECONSTRUCTION,  
AT LEAST YOU  
WILL HAVE PERKY  
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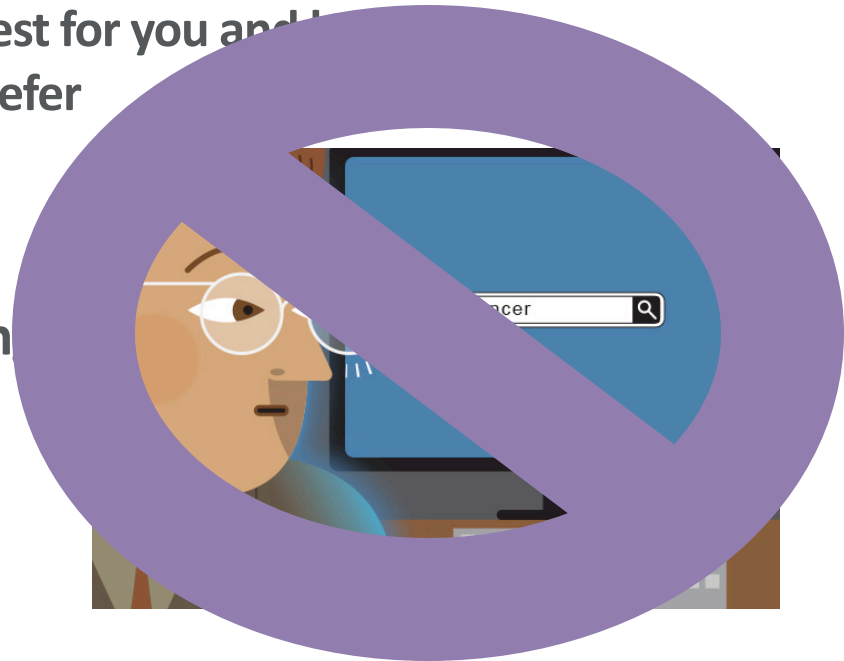
# Coping Strategies

# Manage Information Flow

- Most – but not all – people feel less afraid and depressed when they know more about what to expect
- Studies suggest that those who are well-informed are more likely to follow their treatment plans and recover from cancer more quickly than those who are not
- How much DO you want to know about your cancer?
  - All/Nothing/Somewhere in between
  - Think about which approach works best for you and let your health care team know what you'd prefer

## BUT ALSO:

- Take a break from cancer info-seeking





# Anticipate Possible Physical Changes

- **Ask your doctor what changes you should anticipate**
  - **If drugs will cause hair loss, advice from experts about clothing, makeup, wigs and hairpieces may help you feel more comfortable**
  - **Insurance often helps pay for wigs, prostheses and other adaptive devices.**
- **Consider how treatment will impact your daily activities. Ask your doctor whether you can expect to continue your normal routine. You may need to spend time in the hospital or have frequent medical appointments**
- **If your treatment will require a leave of absence from your normal duties, make arrangements for this**

# Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

There's no time like the present!

- Choose a healthy diet consisting of a variety of foods
- Get adequate rest with good sleep hygiene
- Exercise
  - Recent data suggest that people who maintain some physical exercise during treatment not only cope better but may also live longer
  - Natural anti-depressant
- Limit alcohol and caffeine
- Participate in enjoyable activities



# Try to Maintain Your Normal Life

(As much as possible)

- Regular routines and habits are important to maintaining identity and sense of self
- Take one day at a time. It's easy to overlook this simple strategy during stressful times
- Try to keep in contact with others in your life
- When the future is uncertain, regular responsibilities, organizing and planning may suddenly seem overwhelming – do what you can



# Let Friends and Family Help You

- Often friends and family can run errands, provide transportation, prepare meals and help you with household chores
  - [Carecalendar.org](https://www.carecalendar.org)
  - [Lotsahelpinghands.com](https://www.lotsahelpinghands.com)
- Learn to accept their help even if it's a major change
- Preserve energy for doing things you enjoy
- Time with family and friends can be a welcome distraction
- You may prefer some people's company over others at this time

# Express How You Feel

Don't Try to Be Upbeat if You're Not

- Many people find when they express strong feelings they are more able to let go of them
- Look for emotional support in different ways
  - Friends or family
  - Other cancer survivors, support group
  - Therapist
  - Spiritual leader
- Thinking about or writing feelings down if you prefer not to discuss your cancer with other people



# Who Can I Talk To About Cancer?

- Supportive Oncology Program at RHLCCC
  - Support Groups for patients and caregivers
  - Individual Services
- Gilda's Club of Chicago – free activities, groups and programs designed to improve support and coping
- Other cancer survivors can give you insight into your specific diagnosis or treatment:
  - Imerman's Angels: <http://imermanangels.org/>
- A friend or family member who has had cancer
- American Cancer Society's Cancer Survivors Network: <https://csn.cancer.org/>
- Cancer Care national online network for emotional, physical and financial resources: <http://www.cancercare.org/>



# What Can I Control?



- Being involved in healthcare
- Making positive changes in lifestyle
- Start new (or anew) activities and hobbies that you can do anywhere like art, photography, reading, music or crafts. Coloring books!
- Organize parts of life that you can
- Set a daily schedule
- Review your goals and priorities, and find time for the activities that are most important to you and give you the most meaning

*“I have good days and bad days. But I try to let there be more good ones than bad, and focus on things in my life that I can control. I try to enjoy family, friends, and the little things in life.”*

*-Louise*

# Spiritual Healing





# Other Complementary Treatments for Depression

- Exercise – better than almost everything
- Omega 3/fish oil supplements
  - at least 1000 IU
  - In using any supplement, let your medical team know
- Vitamin D
- Light therapy
  - 10,000 lux
  - 30 mins per day, ideally in morning



# Medication?



*“Ask your doctor if taking a pill to solve all your problems is right for you.”*

# Strengths and Skills You Might Forget You Have

What helped you through rough times before your cancer diagnosis is likely to help ease your worries now. whether that is:

- Any of the above
- A close friend
- A loved one
- A therapist
- A religious leader
- A favorite, meaningful activity that recharges you



Turn to these comforts now, as well as be open to trying new ones

# Develop Your Own Coping Strategy

Just as each person's cancer treatment is individualized, so is the coping strategy you use



# Emotions and Cancer



# Hope and Gratitude

- Millions of people who have had cancer are alive today
- Your chances of living with cancer—and living beyond it—are better now than they have ever been before
- People with cancer can lead very active lives, even during treatment
- Some people see their cancer as a "wake-up call."
- Realizing the importance of enjoying little things in life
- Renewed motivation to go places or do things
- Spending more time with friends and family
- Mending broken relationships



# Post-Traumatic Growth

## AKA Finding Benefits

- Positive psychological change experienced as a result of adversity or challenge in order to rise to a higher level of functioning
- Resilience PLUS
  - A traumatic event can challenge beliefs and psychological well-being... personal growth beyond bouncing back
- Examples:
  - greater appreciation of life
  - changed sense of priorities
  - more intimate relationships
  - greater sense of personal strength
  - Spiritual development
  - Enhanced sense of purpose or meaning

# Enhancing Opportunities for Growth

- Reduce anxiety
- Reflect on your experience
  - Journaling or talking with a friend or family member are ways to process and make sense of a traumatic event
- Restore a sense of safety
- Connect with others
  - Talking with a group of people who have had similar paths can help you look at your cancer journey in a new way
- Create a ‘post-trauma life vision’
  - Think through what you have learned from your experience. Then consider putting a plan in place for living more fully



# Find Ways to Help Yourself Relax and Recharge (Old or New)

- Whatever activity helps you unwind, you should take time to do it
- May need modifications: such as Running -> Yoga
- Meditation, relaxation or imagery exercises may help
  - May require practice
  - Classes, CDs, online
  - Examples at end of this presentation



# Additional Resources

- **Diagnosis: Cancer: Your Guide to the First Months of Healthy Survivorship (Revised Edition) (Harpham, 2003)**
- **After Cancer: A Guide to Your New Life (Harpham, 1995)**
- **The Human Side of Cancer: Living with Hope, Coping with Uncertainty (Holland & Lewis, 2001)**
- **The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness (Groopman, 2005)**
- **When Life Becomes Precious: The Essential Guide for Patients, Loved Ones, and Friends of Those Facing Serious Illnesses (Babcock, 1997)**
- **How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness: Supportive, Practical Advice from a Leading Child Life Specialist (McCue & Bonn, 2011)**
- **The Posttraumatic Growth Workbook: Coming Through Trauma Wiser, Stronger, and More Resilient (Tedeschi & Moore, coming 12/1/16)**



# Questions?

# Thank You

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# Get Ready, Get Set, RELAX

## Getting Started

- For each exercise, find a quiet place where you can rest undisturbed. Let others know you need time for yourself. Make the setting peaceful for you. For example, dim the lights and find a comfortable chair or couch.
- You may find that your mind wanders, which is normal. When you notice yourself thinking of something else, gently direct your attention back to your body. Be sure to maintain your deep breathing.
- Some people like to listen to slow, calming music while practicing these exercises.

*National Cancer Institute*

*<https://www.cancer.gov>*

Posted: February 29, 2016

# Breathing and Muscle Tensing

- **Get into a comfortable position. Close your eyes and clear your mind of distractions. If you're lying down, you may want to put a small pillow under your neck and knees.**
- **Breathe deeply, at a slow and relaxing pace. Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly, raising your belly with each breath, rather than just your chest.**
- **Next, go through each of your major muscle groups, tensing (squeezing) them for a few seconds and then letting go. Start at the top of your head and work your way down. Tense and relax your face and jaws, then shoulders and arms.**
- **Continue tensing and relaxing each muscle group as you go down (chest, lower back, buttocks, legs), ending with your feet. Focus completely on releasing all the tension from your muscles and notice the differences you feel when they are relaxed.**

*National Cancer Institute*  
<https://www.cancer.gov>

Posted: February 29, 2016

# Slow Rhythmic Breathing

- Stare at an object or shut your eyes and think of a peaceful scene. Take a slow, deep breath.
- As you breathe in, tense your muscles. As you breathe out, relax your muscles and feel the tension leaving.
- Remain relaxed and begin breathing slowly and comfortably, taking about 9-12 breaths a minute. To maintain a slow, even rhythm, you can silently say to yourself, “In, one, two. Out, one, two.”
- If you ever feel out of breath, take a deep breath and continue the slow breathing.
- Each time you breathe out, feel yourself relaxing and going limp. Continue the slow, rhythmic breathing for up to 10 minutes.
- To end the session, count silently and slowly from one to three.

*National Cancer Institute*  
<https://www.cancer.gov>

Posted: February 29, 2016



# Imagery

- Usually works best with your eyes closed.
- To begin, create an image in your mind. You may want to think of a place or activity that made you happy in the past. Explore this place or activity. Notice how calm you feel.
- Breathe slowly and deeply. As you breathe in, say silently and slowly to yourself, “In, one, two,” and as you breathe out, say “Out, one, two.”
- If you have pain, you may imagine yourself as a person without pain. In your image, you can cut the wires that send pain signals from one part of your body to another. Or you may imagine healing energy forming and taking shape in any part of your body.
- When you’re ready, imagine that the air you breathe in blows this energy to the area where you feel pain. Once there, the energy heals and relaxes you.
- As you breathe out, imagine the air blowing the energy away from your body. As it floats away, all of your pain goes with it.
- Repeat the last two steps each time you breathe in and out.