Article Series Mental Health

Struggling with cancer-related stress? A little mindfulness may help.

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If you’re living with cancer, you’re likely all too familiar with cancer-related stress. And if there were a way to help manage that stress, available to you at any time, wouldn’t you be open to it?

You may want to consider mindfulness, a stress-reduction technique that more and more people are using to help them with their cancer journey.

Mindfulness takes many forms, including breathing exercises, meditation3, and yoga. Any one of them can be considered a valuable tool in your toolkit for managing stress.

Studies show that mindfulness can improve quality of life and reduce symptoms of depression that many people living with cancer experience.4 Mindfulness techniques may also help to decrease inflammation (the immune system’s response to injury or illness).

A moment of mindfulness can help bring much-needed perspective and calmness. As Shiori Lange, a UCLA Health clinical oncology social worker who leads mindfulness meditation sessions for people living with cancer, told UCLAHealth.org, mindfulness can help individuals living with cancer “create their own empty space where they can foster peace, strength and empower themselves from within to navigate the journey.”

If you’re new to mindfulness or aren’t sure where to begin, that’s OK. Mindfulness is often called a practice — you can think of it as a skill you get better at over time, just like learning a new language or playing a sport.

Here are some **Microsteps** that can be taken to help you start a mindfulness practice. As always, speak with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Spending a few minutes breathing deeply and slowly with your eyes closed.

Breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth. Deep breathing activates the body's natural relaxation response, known as the parasympathetic nervous system.

In between tasks like washing dishes or tidying, pausing to do a body scan meditation.

Get comfortable and close your eyes. Starting from your toes, mentally scan every part of your body, moving upward slowly. Notice any areas of tension, pain, or discomfort.

Doing a silent walking meditation.

Try going outdoors and taking a short walk in silence. Instead of listening to music or podcasts, turn off your phone and disconnect. Focus on the natural world around you and simply be present in the moment.

Wherever you are, try closing your eyes and imagining yourself in your favorite place.

In your mind you can take yourself to a favorite vacation spot, a place you miss, any place that gives you a sense of joy and comfort. Imagine the sights, sounds, and smells of this place, and allow yourself to simply be.

Naming strong feelings out loud as you feel them.

Putting your feelings into words, sometimes called “affect labeling,” can help you cope with emotions and process what you’re feeling. Try saying phrases like “I’m feeling overwhelmed right now” or “I feel so stressed out today.”

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