Article Series Mental Health

How to Manage the Stress of Cancer Treatment

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As anyone living with cancer knows, going to appointments, receiving treatment and managing your care can be stressful and overwhelming.

“When you’ve been diagnosed with cancer and you’re having treatment, stress, sadness and anger are normal emotions,” said Dr. Parvin Peddi, director of Breast Medical Oncology at Providence Saint John’s Cancer Institute in Santa Monica, California. “Just going into an infusion room can be extremely stressful.”

Along with worries about the physical impact of your treatment, you may feel stressed about how it might affect your work and daily routines as well as your relationships and finances.

The stress of living with cancer is something to take seriously. Your body responds to stress by releasing hormones that may weaken your immune system. Sometimes symptoms associated with cancer and cancer treatment can cause stress. Research has shown that cancer patients report more concentration difficulties, mental health symptoms, anxiety and depression than the general population.

‘A lot of people feel as if their body has been invaded, and the treatment itself can have real physical effects, whether there's hair loss, nausea, or fatigue,” said Dr. Peddi.

The good news is that there are simple techniques that may help reduce your stress while also strengthening your resilience and overall well-being. Asking your care team for clear information, reaching out for support from family and friends, and getting as much movement and fresh air as possible all can be helpful.

Finding moments of joy may help, too. Your cancer journey is serious, but that doesn’t mean it has to be joyless. Some cancer patients find a deeper appreciation for life as they go through treatment.

“I have patients who cry in my office, and I say, ‘It's okay to feel all of these emotions. Let's figure out a way of getting through this and managing your stress,’” Dr. Peddi said. “I ask patients to take it one step at a time and only focus on what’s happening today rather than anything after that.”

Here are six Microsteps to consider if you’re feeling stressed after a diagnosis of cancer. And as always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Scheduling a meeting with your care team to discuss specifics of your treatment.

Understanding what your treatment entails, including potential side effects and how you can deal with them, may help to lower stress.

Asking a family member or close friend to accompany you to your treatment sessions.

Your visit to the hospital or clinic may be lengthy and sometimes uncomfortable. Having someone you care about with you, who's also willing to take you home, can provide practical support as well as comfort.

Joining a cancer support group to share experiences and learn from others.

Engaging in regular conversations with others who understand the challenges of cancer treatment and talking about your feelings may be beneficial. You can learn from people on similar journeys about creative ways to deal with stress.

Making a list of exactly what you need when people offer to help.

Do you need help with childcare, cooking meals or grocery shopping on treatment days? A list allows friends to help when and where they can, and knowing that routine tasks are covered can reduce your stress.

Writing in a journal may help release stress.

Making a note of your feelings and expressing emotions that you might not want to share with others can help you release anxiety as you navigate your treatment.

Watching comedy and having a laugh.

Research has found that laughter may support the immune system, relieve pain, and help you feel more relaxed. Enjoying your favorite romantic comedy movie or TV show, or sharing something funny with family and friends, may provide a welcome distraction from your stress.

Scheduling time to relax in nature.

Consider going for a short walk or stroll in the fresh air. Research shows that gentle movement and fresh air may lower stress and boost the mood.

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