Article Series Mental Health All

# Coping with cancer, coping with stress

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Living with cancer can be stressful. From facing your diagnosis to undergoing treatments, all while keeping up with family, friends and your day-to-day life, there's often a lot to juggle.

Victor, an avid motorcyclist with chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) and small lymphocytic lymphoma (SLL), understands what it’s like to feel that kind of stress. When he was diagnosed, his doctor told him he had two options: He could either accept the fact that he had three months to live, or he could try a bone marrow

transplant. His doctor explained that a bone marrow transplant is a difficult operation that has only a 12% survival rate and can lead to other complications. Victor decided to try the bone marrow transplant. Luckily, his brother was a perfect match. The transplant was successful for Victor, but he had many hospitalizations and infections afterward. And cancer wasn't the only hardship he and his family faced: In December 2016, Victor's house burned down.

> **"Try to find something positive, something that makes you happy."**

Through it all, Victor tried to remain hopeful. He and his wife are now rebuilding their house, and they feel lucky that no one was hurt in the fire. And he is grateful to be alive three years after his diagnosis. Almost every day, he rides his motorcycle through the vast, beautiful mountains of Utah. "Not everybody should ride a motorcycle like I do," he says. "But try to find something positive, something that makes you happy. Even when I had bad days and really ached, I always found something to be grateful for . . . even just waking up and seeing the sun shine."

Staying positive isn't easy, though—especially when you're feeling stressed about your cancer and everything else going on in your life. But, fortunately, there are many ways you can try to relieve your stress.

**Breathing is a great place to start**

Breathing may not be something you think about much. But it can be a powerful thing. In fact, studies show that deep breathing can help reduce your stress. What's more, deep breathing is easy to do, and you can practice it anytime, whether you're at home or on the go. Here's how*:

- First, inhale deeply, inflating your diaphragm (abdominal muscles) if you can.
- Hold your breath for a few seconds.
- Exhale fully, using your diaphragm to push the air out.

*If you've had surgery that affects your abdomen, make sure to talk with your doctor first before practicing deep breathing.

**Meditation**

Meditation might also help you relieve stress.

There are lots of different kinds of meditation.

Some meditation is practiced by being still and silent. Here are some examples:

- Guided Imagery: An instructor or a recorded voice helps you visualize a relaxing scene, such as walking through a meadow or lying down in a peaceful park.
- Mindfulness Meditation: This kind of meditation helps you remain focused on the present.
- Focused Meditation: Similar to mindfulness meditation, this kind of meditation helps you refocus, using an object like a flower or candle flame to bring your attention back to the present moment.

Other kinds of meditation involve movement, such as:

- Yoga
- Tai Chi or Qi Gong
- Walking Meditation

Be sure to ask your healthcare team which kind of meditation might be right for you. No matter which kind you try, you'll likely need to:

- Find a place that's quiet and free of distractions.
- Get comfortable, perhaps by sitting or finding postures or poses that feel relaxing.
- Focus deeply on something, like a word, an object or your breath.
- Try to have an open attitude toward yourself and your surroundings.

**Yoga**

Yoga can help improve concentration, reduce stress and have a positive impact on mental health.

Some yoga classes, like "hot yoga," take place in extremely hot temperatures. Other classes may require you to balance or do twists, backbends, forward-bending stretches or inversions (getting into positions where your head is lower than your heart). Breathing exercises, including deep breathing, are key elements of yoga, too.

Depending on your diagnosis and treatment, certain kinds of yoga may not be ideal for you. So be sure to talk with your healthcare team before trying yoga. They can help you decide which kind of yoga is best for you, and they may be able to teach

you how to modify certain poses.

**Finding balance**

If you're feeling stressed, you might feel like you don't have enough time or energy to do all the things you need to do. Staying organized may help you feel a little less overwhelmed. And here are some other ways you can try to find a better balance in your life:

- Prioritize. Ask yourself what absolutely needs to get done today and what can wait for another day.
- Set boundaries. It’s okay to say "no" when someone asks you to do something that would just add to your stress.
- Surround yourself with loved ones. Try to spend as much time as you can with the people in your life who are supportive. If you have pets, spend time with them, too.
- Do what you love. Make time for hobbies like music, art or watching sports.
- Take a walk. If you are able and if your healthcare team recommends it, try walking around the block. Even 30 minutes of walking may improve your mood and relieve stress.
- Ask for help. Don’t be afraid to reach out for support. If you're not sure how, you might find "How to ask for help—and accept it" useful.

Looking for even more ideas to help you cope with stress? Check out ***This Is For You***, a tool designed to help you cope with the challenges you may face, from diagnosis to treatment to recovery and beyond. Sign up today.

Finding a way to relieve your stress may improve your overall health and may give you more time and energy for the things that matter to you the most.