



Managing Anxiety During and After Cancer Treatment

What Is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of fear or anticipated harm accompanied by fearful thoughts about future events. Panic attacks can feel suffocating and amplify your heart rate, cause a cold sweats, shaking, and a desire to escape. Intrusive worrying thoughts interfere with daily activities and disrupt sleep. Memory, concentration and confidence are affected.

Why Does Anxiety Occur ?

Anxiety indicates we feel threatened:

- Anxiety energizes the body to escape physical threats. Cancer, financial problems or failure are modern threats you can't run from. So anxiety remains
- Cancer creates high uncertainty around significant threats to health, wellbeing, family, and finances. This means people face high coping demand, often exceeding our everyday coping limits, causing stress and anxiety
- Longstanding stressful situations can mean anxiety lasts for many years
- Caffeine (tea, coffee, energy drinks), cigarettes, alcohol, and medical conditions like thyroid disorders mimic anxiety, triggering true anxiety
- Some people may be temperamentally more prone to experience anxiety

How Do I Manage Cancer-Related Anxiety ?

1. Important things to remember:

- Though anxiety and panic feel bad and scary, they don't cause physical harm
- Fear of feeling afraid will intensify and maintain anxiety. Anxiety is fear that occurs at the wrong time and place. Don't fear it. Think of anxiety as an annoyance rather than as frightening. Much in life that is annoying gets ignored
- Feeling helpless about anxiety is resolved by learning to control anxiety

2. Controlling anxiety:

- Healthy diet
 - Stop smoking. Avoid or limit coffee, tea, chocolate, energy drinks and many carbonated sodas
- Learn deep relaxation
 - At the same time and place each day where you will not be disturbed for 20-30 minutes sit/lie very still on a comfortable chair/sofa
 - Systematically relax each part of your body
 - Allow your mind to drift – observe what happens. Just witness how your mind behaves without judgment
 - Remain awake but fully relaxed. When finished, calmly resume normal activities. Keep relaxed. The more you practice, the better you will get at relaxing



- Brisk physical exercise is a great way to reduce anxiety and related tension
 - Begin a regular and progressive exercise activity, such as walking, jogging, cycling or swimming
 - If more vigorous exercise is difficult, begin by walking as fast as you can, following the sequence below
 - Build up your fitness slowly. If already active, aim for medium/hard perceived effort in 0.5-1-minute bursts, easy activity in between. Begin with 1 every 5 minutes, slowly increasing to 1 every 4 minutes and so on
 - Work up to 20-30 minutes each day
 - You should be breathless at the end of each minute and your heart rate should be faster
 - Gradually increase exercise duration by 10% each week



- Reduce life stress as much as you can
 - Don't make unrealistic demands on yourself. Fear of failure is a common cause of anxiety. More realistic demands make success more likely
 - Allow enough time to get to appointments, get jobs done. Say "No" to things you haven't got time to do
 - Slow down. A walk in the countryside will lower anxiety
 - Avoid stress-building activities, like competitive situations, video games, arguments and challenging yourself. Substitute calming activities, such as reading, painting, gardening, and so on
 - Sleep: most people need 7-8 hours of good quality sleep every 24 hours. Older people need less. Take one 20-minute daytime nap; Keep regular bed and waking times. Avoid digital devices in the hour before bed
 - Talk to your family about your concerns. Listen to theirs. Sharing worries helps you see different points of view and builds support

Cancer and its treatment are stressful and worrying for all the family. Some anxiety is healthy, but don't allow anxiety to take over your life. These guidelines can help you regain control over anxiety.

For further help, call **HKU Jockey Club Institute of Cancer Care** Hotline on **3917 9606** and talk to one of our counselors who will assess how best to assist you.

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