



Depression After Cancer and Cancer Treatment



What Is Depression?

Feeling sad, disinterested or unhappy for a few hours to a few days is normal. But if it lasts months, intensifies, interferes with daily life or distresses you, or you begin feeling a failure or worthless, lose interest and pleasure in activities you used to enjoy, or have unwanted changes in sleeping or eating habits, then you may be depressed.

Why Does Depression Happen?

Loss and feeling helpless about it is the most common cause of mild depression (dysphoria) and more severe depression. Examples include:

- Relationship breakdown (bereavement, divorce, close friends who leave)
- Important goals or ambitions that cannot be achieved
- Losing your job, other meaningful roles, or income
- Serious illness or other threats to future plans

Cancer and treatments disrupt daily activities, interfere with plans, relationships, challenge our control over our lives, and threaten our sense of self, identity, and life expectancy. All involve loss of past, present and future things important for most people.

Some people are more prone to depression. You may be more vulnerable if:

- You have blood relatives (grandparents, parents, siblings) who have had depression
- You were the victim of abuse, or lost a parent during childhood
- You have had previous attacks of depression. You have an illness, or take medication, which can cause depression as a side effect



Why Is Depression a Problem in Cancer?

Cancer patients are more likely to be depressed than healthy people, but no more likely than people with other serious illness. In cancer, depression is most commonly associated with:

- Feeling you have lost control over your health, your life or activities
- Changes in body appearance (loss of hair, skin or weight changes) or body function (fatigue, loss of a body part following surgery)
- Anticipating future loss, such as retirement plans, children's graduation or other achievements, financial issue, a long life
- Worry about impaired roles, family or work responsibilities
- Unresolved pain or other symptoms, like fatigue that prevent everyday activities
- Feeling hopeless or that life has no purpose because you have cancer
- Some cancer medication can cause depression
- Poor sleep increases tiredness and depression



What Can I Do If I'm Feeling Depressed?

Depression is difficult because it lowers motivation to do things. However, several things effectively help:

- Exercise is as effective as antidepressant medicine against depression. Begin a regular and progressive exercise activity, such as walking, jogging, cycling or swimming. Build up your fitness slowly, or if you are already active, try to work harder in short 1-minute bursts with easy activity in between. You should be breathless at the end of each minute and your heart rate should be faster. Gradually increase exercise time, rather than just distance
- How do you motivate yourself to become more active?
 - Exercise with a friend or relative
 - Schedule a given time each day to exercise (allowing for your current fitness level and condition)
 - Chart or record exercise duration, type, and perceived effort (Very easy, Easy, Moderate, Hard, Very hard). You should aim for at least Moderate effort, building to Hard
 - Reward yourself with a treat and self praise after you successfully complete the exercise. Congratulate yourself
 - Resist criticizing your ability or the benefits of exercise. Start slowly and build up



- Acceptance-based cognitive behavioural therapy is an effective way to manage depression. A trained therapist will teach you strategies to challenge and overcome many of the negative features and thought patterns that maintain depression. **HKU Jockey Club Institute of Cancer Care** Hotline can provide more information
- Avoid alcohol, which is a depressant, and if you are a smoker, stop, or substitute nicotine gum. These drugs contribute to general poor health
- Talk to your family and friends. They can support you and it enables them to help at a time when they also may be feeling helpless
- Do not isolate yourself. This can make things worse
- If you can, do some voluntary works. This can very effectively help to tackle depression by helping to reset your worldview, which improves mood
- Tell your doctor about unresolved physical symptoms, like pain or fatigue if they are troublesome, ask for medication or call **HKU Jockey Club Institute of Cancer Care** Hotline on **3917 9606** for advice

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