

Cancer and Mental Health

A cancer diagnosis affects more than the body. It can also lead to significant effects on a person's mental health. Treating both cancer and mental health struggles is essential to healing.

The Mind-Body Connection

Researchers at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis have found the connection between the body and mind is not just a concept. Their study reveals that the brain areas responsible for movement are connected to networks involved in cognition, planning, and regulating involuntary bodily functions like blood pressure and heartbeat. This discovery demonstrates a real physical link between the body and the mind within the brain's structure.¹

It is estimated up to one-third of people with cancer are also living with depression.² The effect, according to studies, on those dealing with severe mental illness, dementia, and substance use are more likely to have lower chances of survival after cancer diagnoses.³

Common Symptoms

A cancer patient may be experiencing depression if they have some of these symptoms nearly every day for 2 weeks or more:⁴

- Little interest or pleasure in doing things
- Trouble falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much
- Poor appetite or eating too much
- Feeling bad about themselves
- Feelings of failure
- Trouble concentrating on things like reading or watching television
- Moving or speaking so slowly that other people notice
- Being fidgety or restless more than usual

Finding Support

Research has shown that cancer support groups can boost self-esteem, alleviate depression, and lessen anxiety.

Cancer patients and their supporters should check with their medical team or local hospital for support groups in their community.

Online resources include:

- American Cancer Society
cancer.org/support-programs-and-services.html
- Cancer Support Community
cancersupportcommunity.org/
- National Cancer Institute
supportorgs.cancer.gov/

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Mental Health Screening Can Help

Experts have emphasized the importance of regular mental health evaluations in cancer care environments.

Mental Health America has a self-report screening tool available at <https://screening.mhanational.org/>.

How to Support a Loved One Who Has Cancer

The American Cancer Society suggests ways to help support a friend or loved one who has cancer.

- 1. Invite them to talk about their cancer (or not):** They might not bring it up because they don't want to burden you. Let them know you are here to listen. Tell them it's okay if they don't want to talk about their cancer.
- 2. Meet them where they are:** Resist the urge to try to cheer them up or fix them. Meet them where they are and just hold space for them to share without judgment.
- 3. Ask them what they need:** Ask what 3 specific things you can do to be there for them. This could be doing a load of laundry, bringing their favorite treat, or grabbing dinner and talking.
- 4. Take care of yourself:** Caregivers, friends, and family of people with cancer can also experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, and mental distress. These tips apply to you, too.

Treatment

Navigating through depression is a deeply personal and unique journey. It varies from person to person. The approach to managing it should be tailored to the cancer patient's circumstances, lifestyle, and requirements.

Treatment might include counseling, medication, or a combination of both. Sometimes, other specialized activities like light therapy and mindfulness meditation are combined with these standard medical treatments.⁴

Cancer patients who get mental health treatment often see improvement in their overall medical condition, are more likely to follow through with medical care, and have a better quality of life.

References

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- 2 Krebber AM, Buffart LM, Kleijn G, Riepma IC, et al. Prevalence of depression in cancer patients: a meta-analysis of diagnostic interviews and self-report instruments. *Psychooncology*. 2014;23(2):121-130. doi:10.1002/pon.3387.
- 3 Chang C, Hayes RD, Broadbent MT, et al. A cohort study on mental disorders, stage of cancer at diagnosis, and subsequent survival. *BMJ Open*. 2014;4(1). doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2013-004295.
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ABOUT

OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



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