

# Understanding and Managing Anxiety



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## Topics covered on this page

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## What is anxiety?

Just as a cancer diagnosis and treatment affects your physical health, it can also affect how you feel, think, and go about your daily activities.

Anxiety or worry is a normal reaction when:

- Facing a threat or danger.
- Dealing with uncertainty or fear of the unknown.
- Feeling a lack of control over a situation or your body.
- Managing everyday stress.

When living with cancer you may find that anxiety becomes more intense at particular times, for example, when you are first diagnosed, when you are treated for cancer, or after completing your

cancer treatment.

Certain situations can make these feelings worse such as waiting for test results or medical appointments. Occasionally, some cancer treatments and medications may have an effect on your body that can increase feelings of anxiety.

### Some of the mental and emotional symptoms of anxiety

- Difficulties concentrating and focussing on tasks
- Thinking over and over about your cancer diagnosis and what the future will be like for you and your support persons
- Having a hard time getting certain thoughts out of your mind
- Feelings of worry or anxiety most of the day that do not go away
- Avoiding situations, people or things that make you anxious or trigger anxious feelings
- Withdrawing and not participating in daily tasks and social interactions with others

### Some of the physical symptoms of anxiety

- Body tension
- Rapid heartbeat
- Increased sweating
- Dizziness
- Trembling
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea or other gut symptoms with no medical cause
- Difficulties sleeping

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## How can you manage anxiety?

There are a range of ways you can manage anxiety.

### Be aware of your thinking patterns

Anxiety is affected by how you think, which in turn affects how you feel and behave.

It can be helpful to become more aware of your anxiety provoking thoughts. Whenever you are feeling anxious:

- Stop and try to identify the thought that just passed through your mind.
- Write down your thoughts to identify any unhelpful patterns in your thinking. When you are feeling anxious you may have a tendency to make overgeneralisations, think of only the worst possible outcomes or to make assumptions about what another person is thinking. This kind of thinking can make your anxiety worse.

Sometimes when you are anxious you can overestimate the danger of a situation and underestimate your ability to handle it. It can help to think of different ways to look at a situation that is making you anxious, rather than jumping to the worst-case scenario.

People sometimes find that they are worrying for much of the day and night. To help with this, you may want to try 'worry time' to think about all of your concerns. Choose a set time each day to actively think about your concerns. You may even want to write them down. If you catch yourself worrying outside this time, write your worry down and remind yourself that you will have time to think about this concern during your worry time. This will help you to have more worry-free time and to gain a clearer picture of your situation.

### Gather full information

A common cause of anxiety is not fully understanding cancer treatment or prognosis. Try to obtain the information you need from your treating team about the things that you do not completely understand. Ask lots of questions. Some people find it useful to write down the questions they may wish to ask.

### Learn relaxation skills

Learning how to relax can reduce the impact of both anxiety and treatment-related symptoms (such as nausea). There are many different relaxation techniques. Two that you might want to try include:

#### Slow Breathing

- Slow breathing is a very effective way to become more relaxed.
- Simply breathe in slowly and deeply, all the way to your belly. Then let your breath out in a slow and controlled manner. Some people like breathing in through their nose, and out through their mouth. Do whatever is most comfortable for you.
- You can practice this regularly (10-15 minutes each day) to help with general relaxation and

wellbeing.

## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This relaxation involves noticing tension in the muscles of your body, and relaxing this tension in each part of your body, one part at a time. Start with your head, and work 'progressively' through your arms, body, legs and feet. Repeat this as many times as needed.

Consider attending a relaxation or mindfulness meditation class or listening to an audio recording of a [guided relaxation exercise](#).

## Maintaining a healthy lifestyle

Sometimes when we are feeling anxious we can neglect our physical health. Looking after our body can help with managing anxiety. You can improve your general health by:

- Decreasing caffeine and alcohol use
- Having a well-balanced diet
- Engaging in regular exercise
- Maintaining good quality sleep

## Seeking help from a mental health professional

If anxiety feels overwhelming and persists for a long time, it can be helpful to speak to a professional about how you are feeling. Explore your options listed at the bottom of this page.

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## Further information and support services

### Further information

#### **Beyond Blue - Anxiety information**

[Visit Website](#)

#### **Black Dog Institute - Anxiety information**

[Visit Website](#)

## **Cancer Council - Emotions and Cancer booklet**

[Download Guide](#)

## **Finding a mental health professional**

You can begin by speaking to your General Practitioner (GP). GPs can discuss your emotional concerns with you and can link you to supports in the local community, such as a psychologist or social worker.

You can also speak to your cancer clinician. Most cancer services have a range of psychological support options including psychologists, social workers, psychiatric nurses and psychiatrists. If this isn't available at your local health service, ask them what support is available in the local community.

You can find a local Psychologist with a referral or a mental health care plan from your GP.

### **Search for a local Psychologist**

[Visit Website](#)

### **Search for a local Psychiatrist**

[Visit Website](#)

### **Health Direct**

Health Direct provides information about what a mental health care plan is and how you can work with your GP to access a mental health care plan.

[Visit Website](#)

## **Online self-help programs and smartphone apps**

### **This Way Up - Health anxiety course**

This Way Up is a trusted Australian provider of evidence-based, internet-delivered Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (iCBT) programs.

[Visit Website](#)

### **Moodgym**

Moodgym is like an interactive self-help book which helps you to learn and practise skills which can help to prevent and manage symptoms of depression and anxiety.

[Visit Website](#)

### **MindSpot - Mood mechanic course**

A digital mental health clinic for all Australians.

[Visit Website](#)

### **Mental Health Online - Anxiety Program**

Mental Health Online provides comprehensive and effective online services and programs free of charge.

[Visit Website](#)

## **Relaxation and mindfulness**

### **Cancer Council NSW – Finding calm during cancer**

Meditation and relaxation practices

[Visit Website](#)

### **Headspace**

Meditation and mindfulness app

[Visit Website](#)

### **Smiling Mind**

Web and app-based meditation program

[Visit Website](#)

## Cancer support services

### Cancer Council Victoria

A non-profit cancer charity organisation involved in cancer research, patient support, cancer prevention and advocacy.

[Call 13 11 20 to speak with a cancer nurse](#)

[Visit Website](#)

[Support Groups](#)

[Cancer Connect peer support](#)

[Online Community](#)

### WeCan

A supportive care website

[Visit Website](#)

## Telephone support services

### Beyond Blue

All calls are with a trained mental health professional, and completely confidential. They will only ask you your first name and you can remain completely anonymous.

[Phone: 1300 224 636](#)

[Visit Website](#)

### Lifeline

Lifeline provides all Australians experiencing a personal crisis have access to 24-hour crisis support by trained professional

[Phone: 13 11 14](#)

[Visit Website](#)

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