CANCER MIND CARE

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Stress Management

Topics covered on this page

- What is stress?
- Strategies to cope with stress
- Further information and support services

What is stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to pressure from an event or situation. You may notice you experience stress as a physical, mental or emotional reaction. Stress affects all of us and is not the same as anxiety or depression but can be a factor in increasing your risk to developing psychological problems.

A diagnosis of cancer, upcoming tests, or medical appointments are understandable causes of stress.

Whilst stress is a normal human reaction, at times it can feel overwhelming, so learning ways to manage stress can be helpful.

Stress can be acute (in the moment) or chronic (long lasting). If the effects of stress stay in your body for too long it can have a damaging effect. Being aware of the warning signs can be important.

What are the physical effects of chronic stress?

- Headache
- Problems with sleeping (too much or too little)
- Muscle stiffness and tension (jaw clenching, neck pain)

- Gastrointestinal problems
- Change in sex drive
- Increased blood pressure

What are the emotional effects of chronic stress?

- Feeling stuck
- Desire to smoke
- Up and down mood
- Anxiety
- Restlessness
- Feeling unmotivated
- Irritability
- Agitation
- Short temper/quick to anger
- Crying

What are signs of stress overload?

- Panic attacks
- Persistent low mood
- Worrying all the time
- Feeling you're under constant pressure
- Drinking or taking drugs to deal with your stress
- Overeating
- Withdrawing from family and friends

Strategies to cope with stress

Recognise the source of your stress

- What are your realistic concerns?
- Do you need to ask for more information from your treating team, or need details of a treatment plan?
- What areas of your life are affected by your diagnosis?
- Is there additional support I can utilise? (e.g. financial, burdens of childcare, domestic

responsibilities)

Understanding your reaction

Stress is normal at times of great change or trying to adjust to new information or physical changes. Be kind and compassionate to yourself.

Examine your supports

- Who are you able to share your concerns with?
- Are there family, friends, colleagues you can talk to about how you are feeling?

Cut down on unhelpful behaviours

Some behaviours, such as drinking alcohol or smoking, may give us short-term relief, but can actually increase our stress over the longer-term. When you get the urge to engage in these behaviours try choosing another activity, such as exercise or a relaxation practice, which may be more helpful.

Exercise

Physical activity may help increase the production of endorphins (happy hormones) helping us feel better, as well as reducing the negative effects of stress.

Your distress and fitness level can be improved with almost any form of exercise. The most important thing is to pick an activity that you enjoy, and is easy to access.

Meditation

The practice of focused attention has been found to reduce the stress response. Guides or classes for meditation are available through a number of providers. Explore the relaxation and mindfulness resources listed at the bottom of this page.

Sleep

Sleep allows our brains to recharge and our bodies to rest. Sometimes physical discomfort or worry can interfere with our ability to get to sleep or stay asleep. We know that prioritising sleep, and reducing behaviours that negatively impact sleep (e.g. caffeine intake) significantly affects our stress response.

Healthy diet

Eating regularly and a well-balanced diet are important ways of managing stress.

Positive activities

When life is difficult it is important that you take time out to engage in activities that you enjoy, and remind yourself of what you value and what makes you happy.

Seek help from a mental health professional

If your stress is interfering with your ability to function and is ongoing, you may want to find a mental health professional. Explore your options listed at the bottom of this page.

Further information and support services

Further information

Beyond Blue – Reducing stress information
Visit Website

National Cancer Institute – Stress fact sheet
Visit Website

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

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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Content is sourced from published research literature, grey literature sources (e.g. clinical guidelines) and opinions of clinical experts. It is not intended to reflect all of the available evidence and is not intended to be exhaustive.

The authors acknowledge that it is possible that other relevant guidelines or scientific findings may have been published since the development of the website.