CANCER MIND CARE

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Wellbeing

Topics covered on this page

- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Exercise
- Stress
- Relationships
- Writing with Cancer
- Further information and support services

Sleep

Work with your body clock

We have an internal body clock that is set to various routines and external triggers like sunshine. Learn to work with your body clock. Set up habits that promote good sleep.

- Get up at the same time every day
- Go to bed at the same time – consistency builds quality
- Build a ritual around sleep to train yourself, for example check phone for the last time, read for 20 minutes, tidy your room, stretch, meditate, sleep… whatever suits you

Improve your sleeping environment

Anything you can do to make your room quieter, darker or more comfortable will help, but of course it isn't always easy, but at least think about:

- Right temperature – and the right clothes for you

- Dark – close the curtains, or even cover the window if you can
- Quiet – if you need to use ear plugs

Avoid anything that stimulates you like coffee or cigarettes

And also beware of alcohol – whilst it may relax you, it will also wear off in the middle of the night and wake you to go to the toilet

Relax your mind

Try anything that will calm you down – relaxation exercises, reading, a warm bath… anything you find helpful to wind down

And avoid social media or work in bed – it fires up your brain

For further information, visit the Sleep page.

Nutrition

Cancer requires special attention to nutrition. Consider seeing a Dietitian for tailored nutrition advice (speak to a healthcare professional at your local health service or medical practice to arrange a referral).

Healthy eating advice for the general population is outlined in the tips below. This does not replace specific advice provided by your healthcare professional.

Enjoy a wide variety of nutritious food from the five food groups every day:

- Vegetables
- Fruit
- Wholegrains, such as breads, cereals, rice, pasta, noodles, polenta, couscous, oats, quinoa and barley
- Lean meats, poultry, fish, eggs, tofu, nuts, seeds and legumes/beans
- Dairy foods such as milk, yoghurt, cheese (and/or alternatives)

- It is best to limit your intake of foods containing added sugars, saturated fat and added salt.

Drink less alcohol. For further details, visit alcohol.gov.au

Avoid too much caffeine such as coffee, tea, energy or cola drinks.

For further information, visit the Cancer Council Victoria's nutrition page

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Exercise

Before taking part in any exercise program, either during or soon after your treatment, it is important to talk with your oncologist or general practitioner (GP) about any precautions you should take.

Consider seeing an Exercise Physiologist or Physiotherapist for tailored advice (speak to a healthcare professional at your local health service or medical practice to arrange a referral).

Exercise advice for the general population is outlined in the tips below. This does not replace specific advice provided by your healthcare professional.

- Exercise is the cheapest and easiest way to improve your mental health
- Exercise helps with anxiety, depression, stress levels as well as having physical benefits
- The trick is building a routine – finding ways to incorporate some exercise each day – even as little as 20 minutes helps
- Try to find a mix of activities such as walking, cycling, running, swimming, gym or community sport
- Consider things you haven't tried before for example, yoga or pilates. There are many online options you can do in your own home, such as Yoga for Beginners

For further information, visit the Cancer Council Victoria's exercise page

You may also like to join Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre's online 'Let's talk exercise' program with a qualified exercise physiologist.

Stress

There are two secrets to reducing stress:

- The first is to learn relaxation strategies
- The second is to find structured approaches to dealing with stressful situations

For relaxation strategies, think of relaxation like any other skill – you have to learn it and practice it to get good at it. To really improve your relaxation skills, you should try to do at least 20 minutes practice per day.

A structured approach to dealing with stress means finding simple ways to contain your worries. The most common is to write down the problem causing stress, then write a list of possible things you can do, and for each thing, write down the pros and cons. Then allow yourself time to think about the information, and then make a plan.

Explore the relaxation and mindfulness resources listed at the bottom of this page.

For further information, visit the Stress Management page.

Relationships

Great relationships are the final step in developing psychological wellbeing.

- Think about the relationships that nourish you and nurture them
- Think of the relationships that cause you stress, and consider pulling away for a short time until you feel stronger
- Re-connect with people from your past who you miss – a simple phone call or email can do wonders "Hi, it's me, I was thinking about you and thought I'd call and say hi"

For the problematic relationships, start to actively think about how you could improve them. Start with small changes, and see how you go.

Here are some tips for good relationships

- Effective communication – honesty is always best. Never underestimate kindness in interactions. Listen, not to comment, but to truly understand. If people feel heard, they are more willing to meet you halfway
- Schedule time to talk – when you're both calm and free of distractions
- Don't take other people's anger personally – in 99% of cases, they are just stressed and letting off steam. However, you should never tolerate violence or aggression
- Schedule time for fun things
- Respect other people's boundaries and protect your own – tolerate time apart and try not to live

in each other's pockets, especially during times of isolation when you are stuck in the house together

For problems in relationships

- State the problem
- Truly attempt to understand the other person's perspective
- Engage in discussion
- Listen as much as you talk
- Don't rush it
- Be optimistic
- Be kind

For relationships that have drifted

- Be creative and bold
- Make contact but don't expect too much too soon – often the other person needs a little time
- Remember that initiating repair is a form of love

If you have the energy and space, think about your friends and family who might benefit from some connection and initiate contact.

Writing with Cancer program

The Writing with Cancer program is a collaboration with a professional writer and person of lived experience, Catherine Deveny and the Psychology and Psychiatry Departments at Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre. There are 6x 40 minute videos which focus on expressive writing tasks, psychoeducation and the opportunity for reflection and guided emotional "check-in".

The aims are:

- To improve psychological wellbeing
- To learn about writing
- To facilitate creative, self-expression and enjoyment.

Watch the series:

- Watch Writing with Cancer

Psychological first aid

Watch Video

Further information and support services

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

Disclaimer

This content contains information that has been approved by reference groups comprising relevant health professionals, consumers and non-government organisations.

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.