



# EMPOWER & CONNECT

A Toolkit for Managing Co-Occurring Cancer and Depression Across Europe

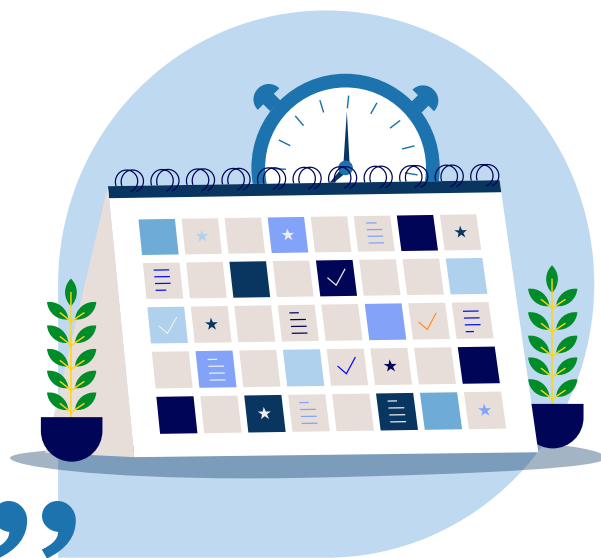


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# Introduction

“ I think that cancer diagnosis in itself, is an identity shift because time is no longer infinite. The question is, first of all, how much time do I have? Am I going to be living for another year, two years, three years, five years... ”



Cancer is not just a physical experience. It also affects a person's mental well-being.

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A diagnosis of cancer is often accompanied by overwhelming emotions such as fear, anxiety, sadness, and despair. This can lead to depression, which is one of the major concerns for cancer patients because of its impact on quality of life and response to treatment.

Depression involves persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and loss of interest in activities that one used to enjoy. Though depression can affect anyone, it is particularly challenging for cancer patients. The diagnosis itself, along with the difficulties of treatment and the uncertainty surrounding prognosis, can lead to or worsen depressive symptoms. Research shows depression among cancer patients is alarmingly high, much higher than people without cancer. The journey through cancer treatment can be physically uncomfortable and emotionally distressing, and it can involve questioning one's existence, all of which can contribute to the emergence of depressive symptoms.

The side effects of cancer treatments, such as fatigue, pain, and changes in appearance, can further add to the psychological distress experienced by patients. Surgical procedures and appearance-related side effects, such as hair loss and scarring, can impact intimate relationships, leading to high levels of distress and depression. Partners are crucial in promoting patients' well-being and in providing support throughout the cancer journey.

**A diagnosis of cancer can increase the chances of experiencing symptoms of depression.**

Depression and chronic psychological stress can lead to physical effects on the body. The immune system plays a key role in preventing cancer growth, and depression and chronic stress can suppress healthy immune function. Depression can also contribute to unhealthy lifestyle, such as poor diet, reduced physical activity, smoking and increased alcohol consumption, which may indirectly increase worsen cancer symptoms, reduce engagement with treatment and affect prognosis. It is essential therefore, to address any mental health issues as soon as possible.

**It is important to be aware of the links between depression, distress, anxiety, and cancer.**



It's crucial to understand that depression can negatively affect quality of life, such as relationships, work, social activities, day-to-day routines and responsibilities. In cancer patients depression can:

- 1 Reduce or stop adherence to cancer treatments;
- 2 Increase excessive worry about cancer recurrence;
- 3 Lead to think mostly about the negative aspects of life;
- 4 Prevent a person prioritising their health.

With this in mind this toolkit aims to provide practical guidance and resources to help people navigate the complexity of having a diagnosis of cancer and depression. It covers a range of different topics to offer a comprehensive overview of what contributes to developing depression and its warning signs; effective coping strategies; and, accessing supportive resources.

The material in this toolkit has been gathered from people with lived experience of cancer and depression and the existing research evidence. The goal is to empower patients to tackle both cancer and depression by fostering resilience, hope, a sense of community and promote healing.

## What leads to depression and what to look out for?



## These include:

- **History of depression:**

Having a personal or familial history of depression or other mental health disorders can increase your vulnerability to experiencing depression during or after your cancer treatment. Past experiences with depression may make you more sensitive to the stress of dealing with cancer, making it important to monitor your mood closely and seek help if needed.

- **Lack of support:**

Having people who care about you can make a big difference. Strong social support networks provide emotional comfort and practical assistance during difficult times. If you don't have close family or friends to lean on, you might feel isolated or alone in your cancer journey, which can increase the chances of feeling depressed.

- **Dealing with treatment side effects:**

Cancer treatments like chemotherapy and surgery can take its toll. The physical side effects of cancer treatment, such as nausea, pain, fatigue, and changes in appearance, can impact your emotional well-being.

Even after cancer treatment is over side effects can still be experienced. These can negatively affect mood.

- **Worrying about the future:**

Uncertainty about the future and concerns about disease progression can lead to heightened anxiety and distress. Not knowing what to expect or fearing the worst can make anyone feel anxious or sad.

- **Money worries and work changes:**

Dealing with the cost of cancer treatment can be a big concern for many people. Losing employment and reduced work hours because of cancer can lead to financial difficulties and lead to further stress.

- **The stigma of cancer and depression:**

People can experience stigma (or shame) when having cancer and depression. Sometimes there is unspoken blame, that a person with cancer has done something wrong in their life (for example, led an unhealthy lifestyle). Because of this, some people are reluctant to tell people about their cancer for fear of reprisal and only talk to those they trust.

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*[When I told my neighbour I had cancer], she said, “Don't pass your negative energy, I don't want to hear about it again.” So, I decided not to tell anybody and then spent the next year and a half struggling by myself..*

”



Seeking help from mental health services for depression can also be stigmatising but this is nothing to be ashamed of.

# Signs to look out for

- **Feeling down:**

If you're feeling sad, hopeless, or easily irritated most of the time, it could be a sign of depression.

You might also find it hard to enjoy things you used to love.

- **Sleep disturbances:**

Issues like insomnia, frequent waking during the night, or excessive daytime sleepiness can be symptoms of depression. Sleep disruptions can affect your mood and energy levels.

- **Changes in appetite:**

A significant increase or decrease in appetite may be a sign of depression. You might eat more or less than usual, which can affect your weight and overall health.

- **Withdrawing from others:**

If you notice that you're avoiding others, not participating in social activities anymore, or feeling isolated, it could be a sign of depression. Social withdrawal can increase feelings of loneliness and isolation.

- **Thoughts of death or suicide:**

Recurrent thoughts about death, dying, or a desire to die can indicate severe depression. If you have suicidal thoughts, it's crucial to seek immediate help from mental health professionals or emergency services.

- **Mood changes:**

Persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, or irritability that interfere with your daily life could be signs of depression. You may also have difficulty finding pleasure in activities you once enjoyed.

- **Persistent fatigue:**

Excessive and persistent fatigue that doesn't improve with rest could be a symptom of depression. Lack of energy can affect your ability to cope with daily challenges.



# What you can do

Remember that these signs can vary from person to person, and not all patients with depression will experience the same symptoms.

However, recognising these risk factors and warning signs is the first step in addressing depression in cancer patients. If you notice one or more of these signs and changes in yourself, it's important to talk to your healthcare team for a proper evaluation and support. Even caregivers, and loved ones should remain vigilant and proactive in monitoring for changes in mood and behaviour, offering support, and connecting you with appropriate resources and interventions when needed. It's okay to ask for help, and you deserve to feel supported during your cancer journey.

Talking to your healthcare team about your prognosis and seeking support from your healthcare team or support groups can help you cope with fears and uncertainties about the future.

It's essential to communicate openly with your healthcare team about any side effects you're experiencing so they can provide appropriate support and symptom management.

Seek help from mental health services when needed. Many cancer patients find psychological therapy very beneficial in coming to terms with their prognosis and managing their depression.



“ For me, depression is like a person inside or like an inner voice, so I trained that inner voice to fight off the unwillingness to get out of bed. The hardest thing about depression is feeling numb to the point where you almost don't care... ”



# Coping strategies: Tools to navigate tough times

Coping strategies are like your personal toolkit for handling the ups and downs of life, especially when facing challenges like depression while dealing with cancer.

It's important to know that coping isn't one-size-fits-all. Everyone has their own unique way of coping, influenced by different factors like the circumstances in which the stress occurs, its severity and the individual's characteristics. When dealing with cancer and depression, three main coping strategies can be used:



## **Changing your thoughts (Cognitive coping):**

Cognitive coping helps you identify and change any negative or troubling thoughts and perceptions about having cancer and depression and what the future holds. Cognitive coping can help address these types of concerns, create a more positive outlook and generate a sense of well-being and control of one's life or mastery.



## **Dealing with your feelings (Emotional coping):**

Stress management techniques like deep breathing, visualisation, and progressive muscle relaxation can help ease distress, anxiety or sadness. These exercises are simple enough to be integrated into a person's daily routine, making a big difference in how you feel day-to-day.

“*The medical people are brilliant at fixing us and curing us, but for the emotional side, that's where it's lacking.*”



## **Taking action (Problem-focused coping):**

This means sticking to a treatment plan designed for you and staying engaged in healthy lifestyle behaviours, such as being active and eating a balanced diet. These are things that are within a person's control and can help them face the challenges ahead.

# Coping strategies: Tools to navigate tough times

Coping strategies play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of depression in cancer patients. The strategies included in this section were suggested by people with lived experience of cancer and depression.

Key strategies include engaging in activities like walking, art therapy, yoga, socialising, playing video games, following art tutorials, setting challenges, and finding little successes. Knowing what worked for participants was discovered through trying things out and experimenting with different activities.



## **A sense of purpose and keeping occupied**

Engaging in different and enjoyable activities was considered essential. This included taking-up creative activities and hobbies (e.g. art, exercise). It gave participants a sense of being able to achieve something. This was especially so following a diagnosis of cancer and when receiving chemotherapy. Following online tutorials was suggested as a good way to get involved in art projects.

“

*Some sense of accomplishment is really helpful, being creative. It fills the holes that treatment can leave behind, it gives you a nice feeling.*

”





## Nurturing a better lifestyle

Diet, mindfulness, yoga and meditation are useful tools for a holistic approach to inner healing. Alternative approaches are an important part of a person's recovery from cancer and depression, forming an important adjunct to medical treatment.

“

*[After my diagnosis of cancer] I very fast decided to fight. I made myself a plan. I found myself a nutritionist, psychologist and Ayurveda therapist...I call them my holistic team. Whenever I felt depressed, I put on my headphones and listened to meditations, night and day and did yoga. I tried to do a lot of work on my emotions and mental health with therapists. I just tried to keep myself working on healing all the time.*

”

These different coping techniques, can help enhance resilience and improve well-being, even during difficult times. It's worth trying out various strategies to see what works for you. Your healthcare team might be able to help identify other useful coping strategies.



# Practical Strategies

There are also things you can do along with your cancer treatments that may help you feel better.

- **Seek assistance and support when necessary:**

When you're facing challenges, know that you're not alone. Your support system, comprising friends, family, and community members who have your best interests at heart, can be invaluable. Additionally, seeking help from mental health experts, psychologists, or oncologists during consultations can provide specialised support and guidance tailored to your unique needs. Don't hesitate to reach out for professional assistance, when necessary, as trained professionals can offer valuable insights and resources to help you navigate through challenging times. Remember, it's okay to lean on others for support when you need it most.

- **Who to talk to:**

Friends and family offer an important lifeline of support during difficult times. People with cancer and depression often need reassurance and someone to talk to. Managing difficult thoughts can be hard to do alone. Some people find it useful to seek support from patient organisations, who can offer more specialist support, information and advice. Some acknowledged that they did not want to put pressure on their family and friends for support and also wanted to talk to others experiencing a similar situation.



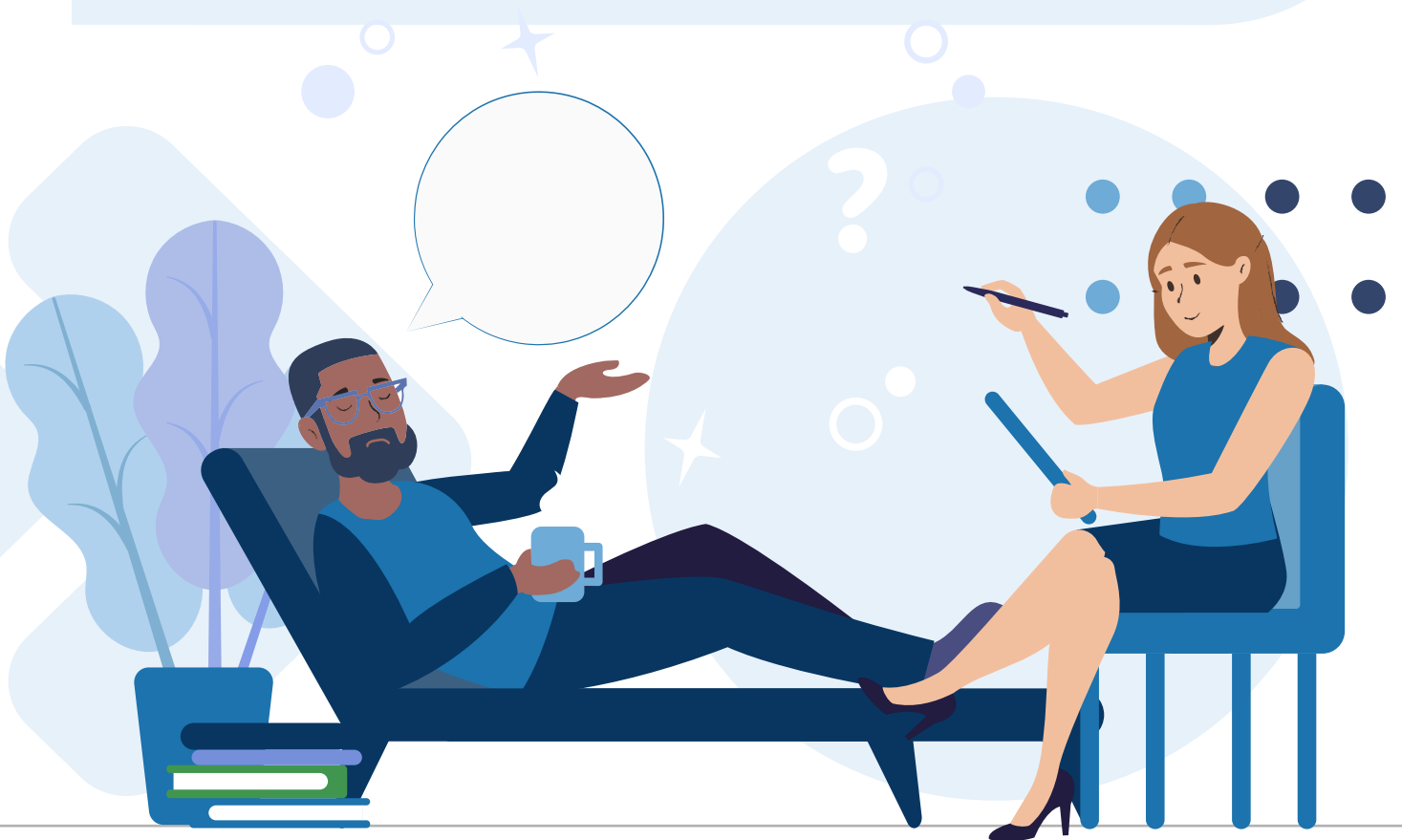
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*For me, it's good to talk about my cancer and depression, to have some assurance from my friends and my family that everything is going to be okay. That's how I tried to fight the diagnosis and the depression.'For friends and family - just be there with support - just hug me, just stay with me and don't ask what did you do wrong...*

“

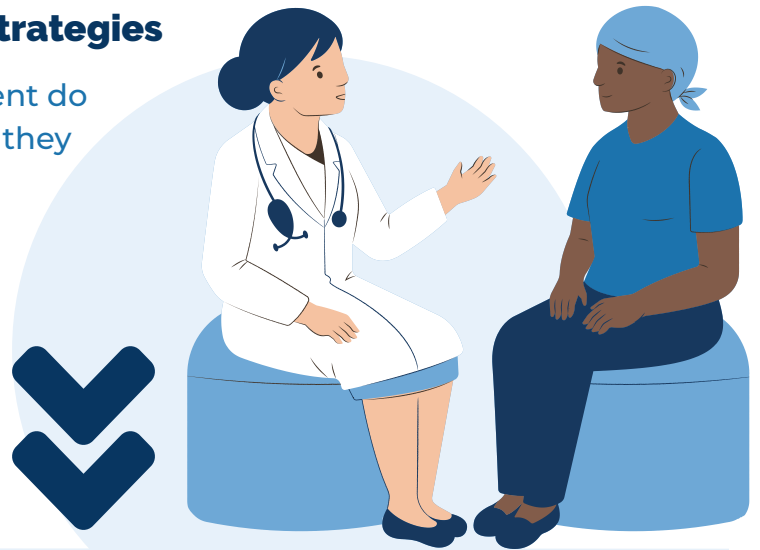
*I really needed professional support because they had the tools and know how to support each other. It helped me feel very secure and then I could plan my next steps to do what I believe would help me.*

”



## Treatment information and coping strategies

Often people about to start cancer treatment do not always receive as much information as they would like. It is important people are fully aware of what their treatment is likely to involve, any side effects that may occur and the coping strategies that can be used.



“

*I'm starting radiation treatment again and I'm scrambling now to find information about that. So, I think show us some coping strategies for each of the treatment stages - chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation.'*

”

“

*After my first chemotherapy session, I was so scared because I didn't know whether the things that happened to me were normal or not.'*

”



## Meeting other people with cancer

Some people find it beneficial to get to know the other people they meet when they are in the hospital receiving their treatment. While it is good to receive technical information from doctors to understand a cancer diagnosis emotional support is also considered important. Some people find it helpful to form friendships with other people in a similar situation.



“

*As I was dealing with cancer, I would share it with others [in the hospital]. If I met somebody new starting to go through all of this, then I said, okay, I can share with you my experience of how to get through the ups and downs over coffee...*

”

## Stay Connected with Others:

Maintaining connections with others is essential for emotional well-being. Here are some tips:

### ● **Join support groups:**

Consider joining a support group or attending group therapy sessions where you can share experiences with others facing similar challenges. Connecting with people who understand what you're going through can provide valuable emotional support.

### ● **Spend time with loved ones:**

Don't hesitate to spend time with friends and family, even if it's just a quick chat or a phone call. Social connections play a vital role in providing comfort and companionship during difficult times.

### ● **Utilise online platforms:**

Explore online platforms or apps where you can connect with people who share your interests or experiences. Engaging with online communities can help you feel less isolated and provide additional avenues for support.

*By staying connected with others, whether in-person or online, you can strengthen your support network and receive the emotional support you need to navigate through challenges effectively.*

## Engage in Physical Activity:

Incorporating regular exercise into your routine, even through light activities like walking or stretching, can trigger the release of endorphins in your brain, which are natural mood boosters.

Exercise serves as a distraction and allows you to unwind, reducing stress levels. Staying active throughout the day can also assist in regulating your sleep patterns, facilitating easier and more restful sleep at night. Here are some tips to become more active:

- **Choose enjoyable activities:**

Select activities that you enjoy and that suit your current level of health and fitness.

- **Start slowly:**

Begin with light exercises and movements, such as walking, even just for 5 minutes a day. Gradually increase the amount of time you spend moving and make the activities more challenging.

- **Track your progress:**

Consider using a pedometer or activity tracker to monitor your progress.

Remember to prioritise personal safety: it's essential to discuss with your healthcare team how to exercise safely and stop and rest if you experience significant pain, nausea, or breathing difficulties. It's crucial to prioritise your well-being and adjust your activities accordingly.

Using both physical and mental health coping strategies provides a more holistic approach to managing cancer and depression. This can include listening to inspiring podcasts by people with similar experiences who have found ways to manage their cancer and depression.

“

*I really like sports, especially hiking, outside the cities, in the mountains, in nature...it's really good for your brain and your physical and mental health. I'm now attending dance classes.*

”

“

*Learning a language just drew my thoughts away from my illness, from my chemotherapy, from my pain, both physically and mentally.*

”



## Create a Structured Daily Plan:

Establishing a structured daily routine can provide stability and purpose. Here's how to do it:

- **Include enjoyable activities:**

Incorporate activities that bring you joy and fulfillment into your daily schedule.

- **List your tasks:**

Make a list of tasks and responsibilities you want to accomplish each day. This can help you stay organised and focused.

- **Stick to a schedule:**

Try to adhere to a consistent schedule to give your day structure and purpose. Set specific times for activities and tasks to maintain a sense of routine.

- **Prioritise self-care:**

Don't forget to allocate time for relaxation and self-care activities. Taking breaks to unwind and recharge is essential for maintaining balance and well-being.

By planning your day with intention and incorporating elements of enjoyment and self-care, you can enhance your overall sense of structure and fulfillment.



## Nutritional Guidance for Mental Health Support:

Eating a balanced diet is essential for supporting your mental health during cancer treatment. Here are some tips:

- **Seek personalised advice:**

Consult with a pharmacist or oncology dietitian for tailored advice on nutrition that suits your specific needs during cancer treatment.

- **Mindful food choices:**

Be mindful of how certain foods may interact with your medications. If you have any concerns about potential interactions, consult with your doctor or pharmacist for guidance.

By prioritising balanced nutrition and seeking professional advice when needed, you can support your mental health and overall well-being throughout your cancer treatment journey.

## Coping strategies for managing physical symptoms:

Dealing with physical symptoms can be challenging during cancer treatment. Here are some coping strategies to help alleviate discomfort:

By incorporating these coping strategies into your routine, you can better manage physical symptoms and enhance your overall well-being during cancer treatment.

- **Mindfulness and deep breathing:**

Practise mindfulness techniques and deep breathing exercises to help manage pain and discomfort. Focus on your breath and try to bring your awareness to the present moment. Deep breathing can help relax your body and calm your mind, reducing the intensity of physical symptoms.

- **Relaxation techniques:**

Explore relaxation techniques such as visualisation or progressive muscle relaxation. Visualisation involves imagining peaceful scenes or experiences to promote relaxation and reduce stress. Progressive muscle relaxation involves tensing and relaxing different muscle groups in your body, helping to release tension and ease physical discomfort.



## Managing practical challenges:

Dealing with practical challenges during cancer treatment can feel overwhelming. Here are some tips to help navigate these obstacles:

- **Seek support from social services:**

Reach out to social services or volunteer organisations in your community for assistance with transportation to medical appointments or help with medication costs. These resources can provide valuable support and alleviate burdens during treatment.

- **Explore flexible work arrangements:**

Consider discussing flexible work arrangements with your employer to better manage your work commitments during treatment. This may include options such as working from home, adjusting your work hours, or taking time off as needed. Open communication with your employer can help ensure that your needs are met while maintaining your professional responsibilities.

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## Manage alcohol and tobacco use

Controlling your consumption of alcohol and tobacco can positively impact your well-being during cancer treatment. Here's why it's important:

- **Limit alcohol intake:**

Avoiding or reducing alcohol consumption is crucial as alcohol can exacerbate feelings of depression, interfere with cancer treatments, and worsen side effects.



- **Consider quitting smoking:**

Quitting smoking not only benefits your overall health but can also enhance the effectiveness of cancer treatments and alleviate side effects. If you're a smoker, think about quitting to improve your well-being and treatment outcomes.

Taking steps to control alcohol and tobacco use can contribute to better health outcomes and improve your overall quality of life during cancer treatment.



## Enhance your sleep quality

Improving your sleep can have a significant impact on your energy levels and mood. Here are some tips to help you achieve better sleep:

- **Address stress early:**

Dedicate time earlier in the day to address any stressful thoughts or concerns that may keep you awake at night. This can help alleviate anxiety and promote relaxation before bedtime.

- **Establish a routine:**

Aim to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day, even on weekends. This consistency can regulate your body's internal clock and improve overall sleep quality.

- **Engage in relaxing activities:**

Choose calming activities like reading, meditation, or listening to soothing music before bed. These activities can help relax your mind and prepare your body for sleep.

Incorporating these strategies into your bedtime routine can promote better sleep and contribute to overall well-being during your cancer journey.



## Recognising the importance of your caregiver's role:

Your caregiver, usually a person who provides informal care, a friend or relative, is instrumental in offering emotional support and practical aid throughout your cancer journey. Allow them to assist you or offer help if you feel it would be beneficial for you.

## Managing the period between cancer diagnosis and test results (e.g. biopsy):

Once a person hears about having cancer it can take up to four weeks before test results come back to explain what stage and type of cancer it is. This period of wait can be unbearable for many.

“

*There is that intermediate stage where you are hit with the diagnosis, you have no idea what your grading is because the results are not back in and you're absolutely in a state of shock. It would be helpful if a psychologist came up with a checklist to say what you can do, how and when to tell [loved ones].*

”

“

*I immediately searched for help for my mental health [after my cancer diagnosis]. I called an association to get some psychotherapy. I asked my doctor and got a psychologist and psychiatric help because I had depression and anxiety.'*

”



# Useful Resources



We have compiled a handpicked selection of useful resources recommended by people with cancer and depression. These include videos, podcasts, and books offering guidance, insights and support to help you navigate through the complexities of these challenges. Best of all, they are all free to access.

Delve into these resources to find comfort, inspiration, and practical guidance.



## Books

### **A Cancer Patient's Guide to Overcoming Depression and Anxiety: Getting Through Treatment and Getting Back to Your Life**

*Derek R. Hopko*

Discover "A Cancer Patient's Guide to Overcoming Depression and Anxiety" by Derek R. Hopko, a valuable resource praised by experts for its practical strategies rooted in clinical science. This workbook offers customisable techniques based on behavior activation therapy to help cancer patients manage emotional distress and reclaim their lives. Dive into a step-by-step approach designed to alleviate depression and anxiety, empowering readers to live fully and focus on their journey to recovery.

[Click here to find the book](#)

### **Between Two Kingdoms**

*Souleika Jaoud*

A searing, deeply moving memoir of illness and recovery that traces one young woman's journey from diagnosis to remission and, ultimately, a road trip of healing and self-discovery.

[Click here to find the book](#)

### **Carry On and Ditch the Excess Baggage!: A Journey through Depression, Divorce, & Cancer**

*Tiffany Allen*

Embark on a heartfelt journey through life's trials with "Carry On and Ditch the Excess Baggage!" by Tiffany Allen, a compelling memoir chronicling the author's experiences with depression, divorce, and cancer. Through witty reflection and heartfelt honesty, Allen navigates through broken engagements and marital struggles, offering insights into finding humor and healing in the face of despair. With a blend of humor and seriousness, this book inspires readers to reflect on their own challenges and discover hope in letting go of past hurts. It's a must-read for those seeking resilience and renewal.

[Click here to find the book](#)

### **Authors to look out for**

*Lilliana Pranić*

She has written about her fight against cancer for over 18 years.

*Joe Dispenza*

Self-help mentor - a book that talks about the power of our minds with healing.

*Dr Christiane Northrup*

Raw food books and cakes.



## YouTube videos:

### Meditations

*Petra Brzovic*

[Click here to watch video](#)

### How to Manage Depression and Anxiety After Cancer Treatment - Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Here is a link to a YouTube video where psychologist Karen Fasciano discusses managing depression and anxiety after cancer treatment. Gain insights into overcoming common post-treatment challenges and learn about the supportive role family and friends can play.

[Click here to watch video](#)



## Philosophy:

### Ikigai

#### Japanese philosophy of living

Ikigai is a Japanese term that blends two words: “iki” meaning “to live,” and “gai” meaning “reason,” which translates to “a reason to live.” It’s a concept that encourages people to discover what truly matters to them and to live a life filled with purpose and joy.



## Podcasts:

### War on Cancer Podcast - Episode: Cancer Trauma, Depression & post traumatic growth

Explore the complexities of cancer trauma, depression, and post-traumatic growth in the latest episode of the “War on Cancer Podcast.” Hosted by Sebastian and Fabian, this episode features licensed psychologist Dr. Dag Härdfeldt, offering insights into the emotional and mental challenges faced by cancer patients, along with practical advice for both patients and their loved ones on coping with a cancer diagnosis

[Listen here](#)

### Living With Cancer - Mindfulness During Treatment

Here is a link to an episode of the Living With Cancer podcast by the Stanford Cancer Supportive Care Program, focusing on “Mindfulness During Treatment.” Join Patty McLucas and Tam Fandre as they discuss the transformative benefits of meditation for oncology patients, offering techniques to cultivate mindfulness and alleviate agitation and judgment. Learn how mindfulness can have a positive impact on feelings and pain management. At the end, Doctor McLucas provides a guided “love and kindness” meditation (duration 10 minutes).

[Listen here](#)



# Conclusions and key points

Here's a summary of what is important to keep in mind.

## **Recovery is possible:**

Depression is a condition that can and should be treated. Treatment may involve both psychological support and medication, depending on individual needs.

## **Utilise social support:**

Allowing friends, family, and the community to offer support in any way needed can be extremely beneficial for your emotional well-being.

## **Adopt a healthy lifestyle:**

Improving your overall health can help reduce symptoms of depression. This includes getting good quality sleep, following a balanced diet, and regularly exercising, among other things.

## **Seek help in emergencies:**

If you are experiencing suicidal thoughts and feel like harming yourself talk to a professional or someone who can help. You can call emergency services or speak to your healthcare provider. You Are Not Alone: It's important to remember that you are not alone in the fight against depression and cancer(?). There is always someone who can help even if it doesn't seem like it.

Remember, taking care of your mental health is essential, and there are resources available to help you overcome depression and regain emotional well-being. With an open heart and a positive mindset, explore the resources provided, knowing that you have the power to overcome even the toughest of times.

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