

Cancer and Mental Health Q&A

Cancer is a disorienting experience for anyone, especially teens and young adults. It can be hard to put a name to some of the feelings that a cancer diagnosis and treatment brings up. Here are some answers to questions you may have about cancer and mental health.

What is mental health?



The part of our health that involves thoughts, feelings, and actions as well as our bodies

What is mental illness?



One of many conditions that involves problems with thoughts, feelings, actions, and/or our bodies that makes it hard to do things we need or want to do



Sometimes mental illness is caused by a specific event, like a cancer diagnosis, but sometimes it comes on without a clear cause



Mental illness is NOT something to be ashamed of, a sign of weakness, or the fault of the person who has a mental illness



Mental illness can be treated, and seeking support shortly after symptoms start can often help make things better sooner

What is anxiety?



Fear or worry about something that could happen, but hasn't happened yet



Anxiety can also include trouble concentrating, sleep or energy issues, physical tightness or tension, and irritability



Anxiety is more than just thinking too much or worrying all the time



Cancer can cause anxiety about lots of things: the future, painful procedures, missing out, or being treated differently are just a few

What is depression?



Persistent feelings of being sad or lacking interest in things that would normally be enjoyable



Depression can also involve feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, or unnecessary guilt



Like anxiety, depression can impact sleep and energy, and sometimes appetite changes too



Cancer has a huge impact on day to day life, and having a serious illness can lead to mood changes like depression

What is trauma?



A situation that threatens a person's safety and is overwhelming to cope with



Trauma is very personal - two people may go through the same event and have different responses



Getting a cancer diagnosis, going through treatment, and hard things that happen along the way are all potentially traumatic events

What is traumatic stress?



Intrusive memories about a traumatic event, or strong urges to avoid thinking about it



Negative thoughts about yourself or the world around you, including self blame or survivor guilt



Always expecting that something else bad will happen, or being unable to relax



Traumatic stress can be very confusing, and it is not always obvious when a mental health problem is related to trauma



Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a diagnosis of traumatic stress symptoms that are happening frequently and disrupting someone's life

What can I do if I'm struggling with my mental health?

Your cancer treatment team can help you understand how your treatment may be impacting your mental health

Your treatment team may also be able to help connect you to mental health care

Many people find it helpful to connect with others who have been diagnosed with cancer

It's important to know that you are not alone in having mental health challenges, especially while dealing with cancer

In an emergency, the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline phone number is 988