

Learning to relax: for people with cancer, family and friends

If you have cancer, or are caring for someone with cancer, you probably have many worries and fears. You may be trying to deal with cancer treatment and its side effects. You may also be worrying about money or your job, or trying to cope with a family.

Cancer can bring many problems and anxieties. People often find that their usual ways of coping are no longer enough.

It is quite normal to feel tense, fearful, even angry. But there are ways to manage and relax.

How do people react?

Some people become short-tempered or overactive. They cannot sit still or eat. Other people become tired, and feel as if they are thinking in a fog. Either way, it can be hard to think clearly and logically.

You may feel anxious or depressed. Feeling you are not coping may make you even more anxious or depressed.

Tension can also cause headaches, stomach-aches, sore back and shoulders, indigestion and difficulty sleeping. Over a long time, anxiety and tension can make people exhausted and physically ill.

What you can do

It is possible to learn how to cope with tension and a sense of panic. In this information sheet, we suggest some ways to cope. Whether you have cancer yourself or are caring for someone with cancer, it makes sense to take good care of yourself. Eat well, get enough rest, and pamper yourself occasionally.

There is no 'right answer'. Different methods work for different people. Experiment, and use what works best for you. Try not to make too many changes at once. Choose one or two things at a time to act upon. The key is to remain in control of your problems and anxieties, not to let them control you.

Learn about cancer

Usually people fear the things they don't understand. With cancer, we fear the unknown and the uncertainty and ask questions like 'Will I die?' 'Will I be in pain?' 'Will I look awful?' 'Will I see the children grow up?'

Learn about your cancer and its treatment. Find out about any possible side effects and what can be done about them. Many people find

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that the more they know about their cancer, the more 'in control' they feel. They are more confident making decisions about treatment, money matters, and many other things. And they are better able to cope with myths and misunderstandings about cancer or depressing stories that other people tell them.

Remember, what has happened to others will not necessarily happen to you. Only your own doctor can give you detailed information about your illness and what you can expect.

Doctors and other health professionals such as nurses and social workers are usually happy to answer your questions. Writing the questions down before the visit can help you to remember them. It can also help to take someone with you.

If you do not understand what the doctor says, ask them to explain it in a different way. Doctors often use technical words without realising it.

Talk it over

It is much easier to see a problem clearly when you are talking about it with someone else. Talking often helps people to find new ways of dealing with problems. And it helps to share your feelings and fears rather than bottling them up.

Find someone you feel comfortable with. It might be someone close to you – a family member or friend. It may be your doctor or nurse, or another health professional, support worker or religious adviser.

You might prefer professional counselling from a psychologist or social worker. About half a dozen sessions should help you considerably in dealing with anxiety or stress. Longer term support is available. Your doctor may be able to refer you. Always check that the counsellor is professionally trained.

Join a support group

In a cancer support group, you can talk to others who have been in a similar situation to yours, and find out how they have managed. Many groups also teach relaxation, meditation and problem-solving techniques.

Carers may like to join a carers' support group.

The Cancer Council Helpline can put you in touch with a group near you.

Put yourself first when you need to

Think of yourself and your own needs. Take time out when you need it, and rest when you are tired. This is as important for carers as it is for people with cancer. Telephone 13 11 20.

Allow yourself to say 'No!' to things you can't cope with, or to visitors you simply do not want to see. Or get someone else to say 'No!' for you.

Eat a balanced diet

Sometimes you may not feel much like eating or preparing good food. But eating a balanced diet (even if you don't eat a lot) will help you to feel as well as possible. The dietitian at your treatment centre can provide information on diet.

Exercise

Even gentle exercise can help you to loosen up, release tension, and feel better and more relaxed. Some people find that jogging – long, slow, regular running – is good. Others prefer walking, swimming or some other activity.

If you have cancer, check with your doctor before you start an exercise program.

Get enough sleep

Relaxation techniques can help you sleep. If you are lying awake worrying about something you haven't done, get up and do it, or watch some television, or read – then try sleeping again. If you have a sleep problem that is worrying you, ask your doctor for help or for a referral to a sleep clinic.

Organise your time

Do not try to do everything. Concentrate on doing the things that really matter, and forget about less important things. Try making lists of the most important things to be done.

Accept help

Accept any offers of help. Most people really want to help, but often don't know how to. Ask a friend to drive you to hospital, pick up the kids, walk the dog etc.

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Do things you enjoy

Keep up your hobbies. Try to get out of the house regularly, even if only for short outings. See a funny film – laughing is a wonderful way of feeling good, even if it is the last thing you thought you could do. Or escape into some music for a while – anything you find relaxing or satisfying.

Seek religious or spiritual support

Religion is an important source of support for some people. Talk to someone who represents the faith you respect. Don't be put off just because you have not attended formal services regularly, or because you are not sure what you believe. Their concern is to help you sort through your ideas, doubts and beliefs and find peace of mind.

Try different ways of approaching problems

Sometimes problems can crowd around and you can't see any way out. Try taking some time to sit down quietly. Start by relaxing – maybe a few deep breaths. Then try to sort quietly through the things that are worrying you.

You might like to do this alone, or with someone else – a friend, family member or professional counsellor.

Start by listing your different problems and worries, both large and small. Then choose one or two that you want to work on – things that can be changed or helped. For instance, you might be worried about not having enough sick leave, or losing your job. You may be very afraid of pain. Maybe you can't cope with the children while you are having treatment. Or the front lawn needs mowing and you can't do it. Or you don't have enough quality time with your partner.

Then list things you can do. Write down every solution you can think of, even the ones that seem silly. For instance, your list might include:

- talking to your employer or your union
- asking your doctor to talk to you about pain relief
- calling the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20
- practising relaxation or meditation each day

- accepting a friend's offer of help
- running away
- setting aside some time just to be with your partner or your kids every day
- organising a cleaner, or asking your local council how they can help
- organising a roster for the family to help at home
- having a weekend away
- taking that trip overseas to see your family again.

Select one or more solutions that seem realistic or possible, and give them a try. After a reasonable period, sit back again and decide how successful you have been.

Take control by calming down

Learning to relax your body and your mind can help you to feel good and in control. You will feel calmer and more capable of thinking practically about your problems. Relaxation methods you could try include physical relaxation, meditation, hypnotherapy, yoga and t'ai chi.

The best way to choose a teacher or a course is by personal recommendation from someone you trust. If you don't know anyone who practises relaxation, try the Yellow Pages or the Cancer Council Helpline.

Health professionals at your hospital, such as a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or social worker, may be able to provide you with information about relaxation classes at your hospital.

Learn to relax your body

This involves learning to relax your muscles of your body. This helps your mind to relax and become calm.

You might join a relaxation class. You could buy a relaxation tape/cd to listen to at home. Many inexpensive tapes/cds are available through shops, cancer support groups and health professionals. The Cancer Council also has a relaxation tape/cd available to buy. Listen to them before you buy, and choose one that suits you. Make sure it has a voice and background sounds that you like.

If you don't want to disturb others, you could use earphones or a portable tape or CD player.

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Learn to recognise when your body is tense. Sit quietly for a moment and 'listen' to what your body tells you. Is your breathing fast and shallow, or is it deeper and more relaxed? Are your hands clenched? Can you sit still easily? If you recognise when you are tense, you can do something about it.

Give yourself a regular time to relax – maybe ten or fifteen minutes twice a day, or more if you wish. It helps to take the phone off the hook and leave a 'Do not disturb' note on the door.

Try this simple relaxation

Find a warm, quiet place. Sit in a comfortable chair, hands resting loosely. Or lie on your back, arms resting by your side.

Close your eyes and let yourself slow down. Breathe in gradually and deeply. Hold the air for a few seconds. Then let it go, breathe out, feel your body go loose and limp. Let the tension slip away as the air flows out. Repeat. With each breath out, feel more tension slide from your body. You may begin to feel calmer and more peaceful.

Meditate, and quieten your mind

If you learn to quieten your mind the muscles of your body become calm and relaxed as well, and your heart and breathing slow down. This helps you to approach problems more calmly, and to find better ways of dealing with them. It helps you to feel better and more in control of your life.

Meditation takes longer to learn than relaxation, and it needs to be practised regularly. Twenty to forty minutes each day is usually enough, though some people choose to spend more time. There is no 'right' meditation method or teacher. Choose one that works for you. There are also many books and audio tapes available.

Have a massage

Massage can be extremely relaxing, and will often relieve tension and discomfort and make you feel more comfortable. A good massage can make you feel wonderful.

Gentle massage can be very pleasant to share with family or friends. Or have a professional

massage. Look for a massage therapist who has had experience with people with cancer. Many therapists will visit people in their own homes or in hospital. A massage in hospital can be a marvellous way of feeling good again.

Is hypnotherapy for you?

Hypnotherapy can relax your body and mind deeply. It can help you to deal with anxiety and solve problems more effectively. It may also help to control pain and treatment side effects such as nausea.

Remember, you cannot be hypnotised if you don't want to be, and when you are under hypnosis, you cannot be made to do anything you don't want to.

It is important to go to a hypnotherapist who is properly qualified. This means a psychologist, doctor or dentist who practises hypnotherapy.

Or t'ai chi?

T'ai chi is the ancient Chinese art of 'moving meditation'. It is slow, gentle, rhythmical and continuous movements, like slow dancing or swimming in air. In the body, it fosters a sense of physical control. In the mind, it brings stillness and balance. It requires about thirty minutes of practice each day.

Yoga: relaxation for your mind and body

Yoga combines exercises for the body with 'exercises' for the mind. It can help people to find inner strength to deal with the daily stresses of life. Like meditation, yoga is a skill that takes time to learn. Different teachers take different approaches. But there are forms of yoga to suit everyone, regardless of age or health. The physical exercises can be modified to suit what you are able to do.

For more information contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 (cost of a local call). This is a confidential service staffed by cancer nurses. Information is available in languages other than English.