

# Learning to relax

## Information for people affected by cancer

**Having cancer can cause a range of emotions. You might find your usual ways of coping are no longer enough. This factsheet provides tips for ways to cope with the emotional impact of cancer.**

### How do people react?

It is not uncommon to feel shocked or numb and find it difficult to take things in. You may feel angry, sad, fearful or anxious. Some people may find it hard to believe this is happening to them, others may blame themselves or something or someone. Others may withdraw from families and friends.

Regardless of the reaction, it can be hard to think clearly and logically. Feeling that you are not coping may make these emotions feel worse, but there are things you can do to help you cope.

### What you can do

Whether you have cancer yourself, or are supporting someone with cancer, it is important to take good care of yourself.

Coping with cancer can be challenging and different things work for different people. Experiment to find what works best for you – making too many changes at once may not be effective for some people. Consider trying only one or two new things at a time.

### Learn about cancer

We tend to fear the things we don't understand. Learning about your cancer and its treatment may help reduce your fears. Finding out about what you could experience in your treatment, the possible side effects, and what can be done to alleviate them, may lessen your anxiety.

Many people find that the more they know about cancer, the more 'in control' they feel. They feel

more confident making decisions about treatment, practical issues and everyday living concerns. If you know the facts, you are better able to cope with the negative stories, myths or misunderstandings about cancer that other people might tell you.

However, what has happened to others will not necessarily happen to you. Your treating team is best placed to help explain your illness and what you can expect. You may have lots of questions for them – write them down before the visit to help you remember them. It can also help to take someone with you for support.

If you don't understand what they say, ask them to explain it in a different way.

### Talk it over

Talking about your concerns and fears may help. You might be able to see your problem more clearly when you tell someone about it. You may find new ways of dealing with your concerns when you share your feelings and fears, rather than bottling them up.

Talk to 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, social worker or spiritual adviser.

You might prefer professional counselling from a psychologist or social worker. Your doctor will be able to provide you with a referral. Always check that the counsellor is professionally trained.

### Seek support

Each person will have different needs for support. Some may want information on practical support or treatment options and coping with side effects. Other people find it helpful being with others who have been through cancer and talking about how they feel.

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### Types of support

There are many ways to connect with others for mutual support. These include:

- **face to face support groups** – held in the community or in hospitals
- **telephone support groups** – provided by trained facilitators
- **peer support programs** – speak to someone who has had a similar cancer experience.
- **online forums** – such as [www.cancerconnections.com.au](http://www.cancerconnections.com.au)

People looking after someone with cancer may like to join a carers' support group.

Call **13 11 20** or visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) to find the right support.

### Accept help

Accept offers of help. Most people really want to help, but often don't know how to. Create a list of jobs and ask for help doing those. Consider asking a friend to help you to arrange this. Things on the list could include transport to appointments, cooking meals, food shopping, caring for pets, washing and cleaning.

### Put yourself first when you need to

Think of yourself and your own needs. Don't try to do everything – concentrate on doing the things that really matter.

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. Allow yourself to say 'no' to things you can't cope with, including visitors. If you have trouble saying no, ask someone to do it for you.

### Try different ways of approaching problems

Sometimes problems can crowd your mind and make it difficult to see solutions. Try taking some time to sit down quietly. Start by relaxing, maybe try 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.

You could start by listing your different concerns, 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

managing your family or concerned about the side effects of treatment. Then list things you can do, writing down every solution you can think of, even the ones that seem too difficult or unrealistic.

For instance, your list might include:

- asking your doctor to talk to you about issues you are most concerned about
- speaking to a cancer nurse by calling Cancer Council **13 11 20**
- setting aside some time just to be with your partner or your children every day
- organising a cleaner, or asking your local council how they can help
- organising a roster for the family and friends to help at home
- having time away. Call **13 11 20** to ask about Holiday Break which offers short breaks to those affected by cancer.

Select one or more solutions that seem possible and give them a try.

### Try to eat a balanced diet

Sometimes you might not feel like eating or preparing 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 advice. If friends and family offer to help, suggest meal preparation – don't forget to let them know which foods you are and aren't enjoying.

**For a free copy of Cancer Council's booklet *Nutrition and Cancer* visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) or call 13 11 20.**

### Exercise when you can

Exercise has proven to be beneficial for those affected by cancer. It can help you to release tension and feel more relaxed. If you are able to, return to exercise you have enjoyed in the past, or try gentle exercise such as walking, swimming or yoga. Check with your doctor before starting exercise.

**For a free copy of Cancer Council's booklet *Exercise for People with Cancer* visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) or call 13 11 20.**

### Try to get enough sleep

Cancer can cause anxiety which could interrupt your normal sleep patterns. Relaxation techniques may

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help you sleep. If you are lying awake worrying about something you haven't done, get up and do it, or read – then try sleeping again.

If you have a sleep problem that is worrying you, seek advice from your doctor.

### Do things you enjoy

Continuing with your hobbies can help you stay connected with people and activities you enjoy. Try to get out of the house regularly, even if only for short outings. Listen to music or watch a movie, take a long relaxing bath or do something creative—anything you find relaxing or satisfying.

### Seek comfort through spirituality

Often when people are diagnosed with cancer, the spiritual aspect of their lives becomes more important.

Spiritual support can come in many forms. People often find comfort in meditation, quiet contemplation or prayer.

Others find feelings of unity and support from being part of a group or congregation. Receiving pastoral care from a religious or spiritual adviser or a hospital chaplain can often help people, even if they are not part of an organised religion.

### Relaxation techniques to help you cope

Learning to relax your body, and your mind, may help you feel better and in control. You may feel calmer and more capable of thinking practically about your challenges.

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 may be able to do something about it.

Give yourself a regular time to relax – maybe 10 to 15 minutes twice a day, or more if you wish. It helps to turn off the phones and leave a 'do not disturb' note on the door.

Relaxation methods you could try include physical relaxation, meditation, hypnotherapy, yoga and t'ai chi.

Learning to relax may be challenging when dealing with the emotions of a cancer diagnosis and treatment. 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 or in your community.

Cancer Council offers free relaxation and meditation CDs, which you can order online or call **13 11 20**. Other CDs, podcasts or apps are available through shops, cancer support groups, health professionals or online services such as YouTube or iTunes, and some are free. These resources can vary considerably in style, so you might need to try several to find one that suits you.

### 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. You may begin to feel calmer and more peaceful.

### Meditation

Learning to quieten your mind through meditation may help you think more clearly and feel calmer.

Meditation is an ancient practice that involves holding your attention on a subject such as breathing. There are many different types of meditation. Mindful meditation means being aware and present in each moment. Guided imagery, or visualisation, uses your imagination to create healing thoughts. There is no 'right' method or teacher. Choose one that works for you.

Learning to meditate requires regular practice and there are many classes, books, apps and podcasts available.

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### Massage

Massage will often relieve tension and make you feel more comfortable. 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 homes or hospital.

### Hypnotherapy

Hypnotherapy can deeply relax your body and mind, helping you to manage anxiety and stress. It may also help to control pain and treatment side effects such as nausea.

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 doctor or registered psychologist who practises hypnotherapy.

### T'ai chi

T'ai chi is the ancient Chinese art of 'moving meditation' combining movement, breathing and meditation. Movements create stability in the body, reflecting an ancient Chinese concept of balance known as 'yin and yang'. In the body, it fosters a sense of physical control. In the mind, it brings stillness and balance.

### Yoga

Yoga involves performing poses with the body, slowing and deepening the breath, and focusing the mind. There are many styles of yoga with varying intensity – from gentle, such as hatha yoga, to vigorous, such as ashtanga yoga. Some styles may not be suitable during some stages of cancer.

For a free copy of Cancer Council's booklet *Understanding Complementary Therapies* visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) or call 13 11 20.

### More information and support

Everyone copes in their own way. It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel when you are faced with cancer – just as there is no one right way to cope.

For more information and support call **13 11 20** to speak to a cancer nurse, Monday to Friday, 9 am – 5 pm (cost of a local call, except from mobiles).

If you found this factsheet helpful, you might want to request another free resource from Cancer Council; simply call **13 11 20** or visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au) to place an order.

- Caring for Someone with Cancer
- Coping with Cancer Fatigue
- Emotions and Cancer
- Exercise for People Living with Cancer
- Massage and Cancer
- Mindful Meditation CD
- Nutrition and Cancer
- Relaxation CD
- Understanding Complementary Therapies

#### Acknowledgements

Reviewed by Annie Angle, cancer nurse, Dip. Oncology Nursing, Royal Marsden, London, October 2012.

#### Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice. Information about cancer is constantly being updated and revised by the medical and research communities. While all care is taken to ensure accuracy at the time of publication, Cancer Council Australia and its members exclude all liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information provided in this fact sheet.



For information and support  
call a cancer nurse on **13 11 20**  
For other languages call **13 14 50**  
Email [askanurse@cancervic.org.au](mailto:askanurse@cancervic.org.au)  
Visit [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)