



6 Ways to Help Manage Stress After a Breast Cancer Diagnosis

Thursday, January 28, 2021



Pfizer's Chief Patient Officer, Dr. Freda Lewis-Hall, is partnering with other top health experts for the best tips on how to Get Healthy, Stay Healthy. Originally posted on Thrive Global.

When you're faced with a breast cancer diagnosis, stress levels can quickly reach an all-time high. Uncertainties about the future, worrying about treatment plans, balancing work, finances, and the sheer number of questions that occupy your mind can all play a role in building up this stress. And while there's no easy fix, there are ways to help better

manage the many emotions experienced with a breast cancer diagnosis.

Reducing stress can be an important part of your cancer treatment plan and can have important implications for both your mind and body. Getting the support you need can help boost your mood and mental outlook. Here, experts—including breast cancer patients and advocates—share their best tips for managing stress after a diagnosis.

Partner with your doctor and get the support you need

Nothing is more stressful than not having all the information you need to make decisions about your health, says Dr. Neelima Denduluri, M.D., a medical oncologist at Virginia Cancer Specialists. “But no one should feel they have to grasp everything on their own.” To ensure that your doctor is a true partner in your treatment and that your mind is more at ease following every visit, Denduluri suggests preparing your questions before each appointment, and prioritizing what you want to address. “You may be given a lot of information, and it may be helpful to bring a loved one to appointments with you or ask your doctor if you are able to record everything he or she shares with you,” adds Lauren Chatalian, M.S.W., L.M.S.W., an oncology social worker at CancerCare, a national organization offering a variety of free services and educational programs to patients and their families.

Tell people on your own timeline

A lot of patients worry about how to broach the news with friends, loved ones, and extended family. But as long as you have support from a few key people, “it’s 100 percent up to you what you do and don’t disclose to everyone else—and when you share,” says Jamie Larson, associate director of marketing and communications at the Young Survival Coalition. Especially in the beginning, you may need to give yourself time to prepare for the emotional responses you may receive — and to accept that it can be more stressful to pretend (to yourself or others) that you’re “fine” if you’re not. “Breast cancer is one of the most significant experiences that you will go through in your life, so you have permission to take care of yourself first at all times,” Larson adds.

Seek out a support system that works for you

Having a strong support system can provide immense comfort, but what works best for one person may be very different from what suits another. “Someone may or may not feel comfortable sitting in a room for group therapy to work through her feelings. But there are so many options,” Denduluri points out. “With online communities and virtual

counseling, you don't even need to leave your house to get support."

Keep in mind, while an outside support system is important, so is feeling like you have the support of your medical team. "You have to open yourself up to your doctor's knowledge and care, so it's vitally important to trust them. And if you don't, or you disagree with their plan for your journey, find someone else," says Eileen Kastura, who is living with stage 4 BRCA1-positive breast cancer.

Do things that make you feel good—but let yourself feel *all* your emotions

While it's important to listen to your body and give it plenty of rest, physical activity can be a powerful tool for anxiety management during a cancer journey, Denduluri says. Gentle exercise, like a light walk, is a highly effective way to boost your mood and energy if you're dealing with fatigue, she adds. "Yoga and swimming are also excellent options — just get your doctor's OK first." And if you don't feel up to exercise, that's OK, too. "Keeping a journal, meditating, and art are examples of activities that individuals have found helpful," adds Chatalian.

It's also vital to allow yourself to experience all of your emotions, and not be "fine" just because you *are* getting support. "I'd recommend not pushing yourself to feel a certain way," says Jennifer, 45, a CancerCare client with breast cancer. It took me some time to realize that it is OK to not feel OK. In fact, I found that it became more stressful to act as if everything was fine when it was not."

Get help navigating work during treatment

Navigating work after a cancer diagnosis can be a big source of stress for many patients. "If your job will be affected during your treatment, it's important to have an honest conversation in the workplace," Denduluri says. She suggests getting in touch with your human resources department to have a confidential conversation about your rights and protections — which will help you determine a plan for your work. And it's fine to say, "I don't know exactly what to expect, and things might change, but I might need time off for surgery and treatment — can we talk about what my options are?"

Minimize money stress

The financial impact of a breast cancer diagnosis can also add to stress levels — so don't be afraid to ask for help. "If you're having financial struggles, bring it up to the office

managers or benefits office at your hospital or medical practice where you receive care — most of the time, institutions are willing to work with you,” Denduluri says. There are also pharmaceutical patient assistance programs that can help eligible patients with a range of assistance programs that offer insurance support, co-pay help, and medicines for free or at a savings. Like so much of your patient journey, this is not something you have to deal with alone.

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Originally published, Thursday, January 28, 2021