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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Managing Anxiety for Caregivers

This information explains what anxiety is and how you can manage it.

## About Anxiety and Caregiving

Caregiving can be a rewarding experience with many benefits, such as giving you more meaning and purpose in your life. But, it can also be stressful and challenging to balance your own life with helping your loved one cope with cancer. Balancing your own responsibilities and coping with a loved one's illness can feel overwhelming. This is why it's common for caregivers to feel anxious. Anxiety is a strong feeling of worry or fear. While it's normal to feel like you have a lot to do, anxiety is when these feelings get in the way of you living your daily life.

## Causes of Anxiety in Caregivers

Caregiver anxiety can be caused by many things, such as:

- Managing many responsibilities.
- Having to do medical tasks you aren't prepared for.
- Feeling like you don't have control over your own life.

- Concerns about your loved one's well-being.
- Uncertainty about the future.
- Your loved one's emotions about their cancer diagnosis and treatment.
- Your own emotions about your loved one's cancer diagnosis and treatment.
- Not having enough support from your family, friends, healthcare team, or other people in your life.

## **Signs of Anxiety in Caregivers**

Anxiety can cause physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, or both. It's important to recognize the signs of anxiety and ask for help when you need to. The following things can be signs of anxiety:

- Worrying that you aren't able to control
- Nervousness
- Fatigue (feeling more tired and weak than usual)
- A faster heart rate than usual
- Headaches
- Trouble sleeping
- Trembling or shaking
- Sweating

- Dizziness or feeling lightheaded
- Chest pain
- Muscle tension
- Dry mouth
- Nausea (feeling like you're going to throw up)
- Shortness of breath
- Loss of appetite
- Trouble concentrating and remembering

Some symptoms can be caused by medical issues or medications you're taking. This is why it's important to pay attention to how you're feeling. If you experience any of these signs, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also contact any of the resources in the "Resources at MSK" section for help.

## **How to Manage Your Anxiety**

Anxiety not only affects your mood but it can also affect your health and the care you provide to your loved one. This is why it's important to take care of yourself. As a caregiver, you may be handling a lot of important tasks. Balancing all these tasks while making sure you have enough time to focus on your needs can be very hard. Caregivers often feel guilty or selfish for taking time for themselves. Some are afraid that something will happen to their loved one if they aren't there. But, if you need to be a

caregiver for a long period of time, you have to take care of yourself. If you don't, you will soon feel like you're too stressed or tired to do anything and won't be able to do the important work of caregiving.

Here are some things you can do to help you with anxiety.

- **Ask for help and accept it.** Ask your friends and family members for help with household chores or with preparing meals. When people offer their help, accept it. Feeling guilty about accepting help is normal, but needing support isn't a sign of weakness or failure. The less overwhelmed you feel, the better you'll be able to take of yourself and your loved one.
- **Prioritize tasks.** Being a caregiver comes with many responsibilities, such as managing medications, cooking, handling paperwork, scheduling appointments, monitoring symptoms, and much more. It may feel like you need to do all these tasks at once but that's impossible. Choosing what you need to do first will help you stay organized and feel less overwhelmed. You may find it helpful to create a checklist of the things you need to do today, this week, or this month. If you aren't sure how to prioritize tasks, ask for help.
- **Check in with yourself.** Ask yourself how you're feeling and consider your own emotions. Some caregivers find it helpful to keep a journal. Others find it helpful to write out their thoughts and feelings. Some prefer to express themselves

through art, yoga, or dance.

- **Make time for yourself.** Balancing your own responsibilities with your caregiving role can make taking care of yourself feel impossible. Making time for yourself will not only make you feel better, but will also help you take better care of your loved one. Set 3 goals each week to take care of yourself. Small, doable goals set you up for success. For example, instead of saying you'll get more sleep, you might try getting ready for bed 15 minutes earlier each night. When you complete small goals, you get a burst of energy that pushes you to keep going.
- **Do some light physical activity.** Light physical activity can be going for a walk or a short bike ride. Physical activity can help improve your mood and relieve stress. Talk with your doctor before starting new exercises.
- **Spend time with friends and family.** It's important to create a support system for yourself as a caregiver. Anxiety and your caregiving responsibilities can make this feel hard to do, but staying connected to people who can support and talk with you about your experience can help reduce stress and make you feel better.
- **Get professional support.** Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) has many support programs that can help you with anxiety. You can contact any of the resources in the “Resources at MSK” section for help.

- MSK also has a counseling center specifically for caregivers called The Caregivers Clinic. The Caregivers Clinic provides support for people who are having trouble coping with the demands of being a caregiver. For more information, call 646-888-0200 or go to [www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/doctor/allison-applebaum](http://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/doctor/allison-applebaum).
- **Join a virtual program.** You may also find it comforting to speak with other caregivers in one of our online educational or support groups for caregivers. Visit [www.mskcc.org/vp](http://www.mskcc.org/vp) or email [virtualprograms@mskcc.org](mailto:virtualprograms@mskcc.org) for more information.
- **Join an in-person support group.** MSK's in-person support groups are led by cancer-focused social workers. To learn more, call the Department of Social Work at 212-639-7020 or email [forcaregivers@mskcc.org](mailto:forcaregivers@mskcc.org).
- **Connect with other caregivers.** Through MSK's Patient and Caregiver Support Program, you can speak with former patients and caregivers that went through a similar experience as you. They can speak with you in person, over the phone, or through email. For more information, call 212-639-5007 or email [patient2patient@mskcc.org](mailto:patient2patient@mskcc.org). You can also visit [www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/support-groups-programs/patient-patient-support](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/support-groups-programs/patient-patient-support).
  - You can also connect with other caregivers through Connections, MSK's online community for people affected

by cancer. For more information about Connections, visit [www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/support-groups-programs/connections](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/support-groups-programs/connections).

- **Make an appointment with the [Integrative Medicine Service](#).** They provide patients and caregivers with services such as massages, acupuncture, yoga classes, reflexology, meditation, music therapy, and nutritional consults. You'll need to pay for these services out-of-pocket. For more information, call 646-888-0800 or go to [www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine](http://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine).
- **Try relaxation techniques.** Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, meditation, and acupressure (putting pressure on parts of your body to help you relax), can help you manage your anxiety. To learn how to do acupressure on yourself, read our resource *Acupressure for Stress and Anxiety* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/acupressure\\_anxiety](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/acupressure_anxiety)). You can also listen to free guided meditations by visiting [www.mskcc.org/meditation](http://www.mskcc.org/meditation).
- **Medication.** If your anxiety is getting in the way of your daily activities, medication may be helpful. There are many medications that can help improve your mood and treat your anxiety. For more information, talk with your healthcare provider or call 646-888-0200 to make an appointment with the Counseling Center.

- **Find out if your workplace has an employee assistance program (EAP).** EAPs can be different depending on where you work, but they often include counseling for financial problems, stress, anxiety, and depression.
- **Use your resources.** MSK offers many support options for caregivers. For more information about what MSK offers, visit [www.mskcc.org/experience/caregivers-support/caregiver-services](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/caregivers-support/caregiver-services). Other organizations also offer educational and supportive resources. For more information about other support services and caregiving tips, read our resource *A Guide for Caregivers* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/guide\\_caregivers](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/guide_caregivers)).

No matter how you're feeling, we're here to support you and we have resources that can help. Anxiety is something that can be treated. If you ever find yourself thinking about suicide, get help as soon as you can. You can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255). You can also visit their website [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org) to chat with a counselor online. You can contact the Lifeline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

## Resources at MSK

If anxiety is affecting your life in any way, talk with your healthcare provider. You can also contact any of the resources in



this section for help. We can help you find the right treatment for you.

## **Social Work**

212-639-7020

[www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/social-work-support](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/social-work-support)

Our social workers provide emotional support and guidance to patients and their families, friends, and caregivers. Social work offers programs, including both in-person and online support groups. They can also help with practical issues such as transportation to and from medical appointments, temporary housing, and financial concerns. Social workers are available at every MSK location. To talk with a social worker, ask your doctor or nurse, or call 212-639-7020.

## **Counseling Center**

646-888-0200

[www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling)

Many people find that counseling helps them manage their emotions during caregiving. MSK's counselors provide counseling for individuals, couples, families, caregivers, and groups. They can also prescribe medications to help with anxiety, depression, and other mental health problems. For more information, ask your doctor or nurse, or call 646-888-0200.

## **The Caregivers Clinic**

The Caregivers Clinic provides support specifically for caregivers who are having trouble coping with the demands of being a caregiver. For more information, call 646-888-0200 or go to [www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/doctor/allison-applebaum](http://www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/doctor/allison-applebaum).

## **Location**

MSK's Counseling Center

641 Lexington Avenue (on 54<sup>th</sup> Street between Lexington and Third Avenues)

7<sup>th</sup> floor

New York, NY 10022

## **Spiritual Care**

212-639-5982

[www.mskcc.org/spiritual-religious-care](http://www.mskcc.org/spiritual-religious-care)

At MSK, chaplains are available to listen, help support family members, pray, contact nearby clergy or faith groups, or simply to be a comforting companion and spiritual presence. Anyone can meet with a chaplain, no matter their religious affiliation.

MSK also has an interfaith chapel that's open to everyone. For more information, ask your doctor or nurse or call 212-639-5982.

## **Hours**

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

## **Interfaith Chapel Location**

Memorial Hospital (near the main lobby)

1275 York Avenue between 67<sup>th</sup> and 68<sup>th</sup> Streets  
New York, NY 10065

## **Patient and Caregiver Support Program**

212-639-5007

[www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/support-groups-programs/patient-patient-support](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/support-groups-programs/patient-patient-support)

You may find it comforting to speak with someone who has been through a similar experience. Through the Patient and Caregiver Support Program, you can speak with former patients and caregivers. They can speak with you in person, over the phone, or through email. For more information, call 212-639-5007 or email [patient2patient@mskcc.org](mailto:patient2patient@mskcc.org).

## **Integrative Medicine Program**

646-888-0800

[www.mskcc.org/integrativemedicine](http://www.mskcc.org/integrativemedicine)

Our Integrative Medicine Service offers many therapies to complement (go along with) traditional medical care. Some of the services offered include music therapy, mind and body therapies, dance and movement therapy, yoga, and touch therapy. Services are available to patients, their families and caregivers, and to the general public. For more information, or to make an appointment, call 646-888-0800.

## **Hours**

Monday through Friday from 9:00 AM to 8:00 PM

Saturdays from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM

## **Location**

Bendheim Integrative Medicine Center

1429 First Avenue at East 74<sup>th</sup> Street

New York, NY 10021

## **Patient and Caregiver Education**

[www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe)

Visit the Patient and Caregiver Education website to search our virtual library. There, you can find written educational resources, videos, and online programs.

## **Virtual Programs**

[www.mskcc.org/vp](http://www.mskcc.org/vp)

MSK's Virtual Programs offer online education and support for patients and caregivers, even when you can't come to MSK in person. Through live, interactive sessions, you can learn about your loved one's diagnosis, what to expect during treatment, and how to prepare for the various stages of cancer care. Sessions are confidential, free, and led by expert clinical staff. If you're interested in joining a Virtual Program, visit [www.mskcc.org/vp](http://www.mskcc.org/vp) for more information.

If you have any questions, contact a member of your healthcare team directly. If you're a patient at MSK and you need to reach a provider after 5:00 PM, during the weekend, or on a holiday, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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