Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Managing Depression for Caregivers

This information explains what depression is and how you can manage it while caring for a loved one.

About depression

Depression is when you feel sad most days for at least 2 weeks. While it's normal to feel sad on some days, sadness from depression gets in the way of your everyday life.

Causes of depression for caregivers

Caring for a loved one with cancer can be a rewarding experience that brings meaning and purpose. Caregiving while also handling your own responsibilities, feelings, and concerns about your loved one's illness can cause anxiety or stress.

Being a caregiver comes with many tasks, such as managing medications, cooking, doing paperwork, making appointments, and tracking symptoms. You may feel like you need to do all these at once, which can be overwhelming. This is why it's common for caregivers to feel sad, overwhelmed, or hopeless.

Depression can also be caused by:

- Feeling overwhelmed by the many responsibilities of caregiving.
- Experiencing feelings of anxiety, anger, or exhaustion that you then feel guilty for having.
- Not having enough time for yourself.
- Feeling like you don't have control over your own life.
- Not getting enough sleep.
- Concerns about your loved one's health and well-being.
- Uncertainty about the future.
- No longer doing things that you once enjoyed.
- Your loved one's emotions around 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 Depression in Caregivers

Depression can cause physical symptoms, emotional symptoms, or both. It's important to recognize them and ask for help when you need to. This can help you understand your feelings and work towards feeling better.

Signs of depression include:

- Feeling sad, down, or hopeless.
- Not enjoying activities that you once liked.
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless.
- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Feeling very tired or having little energy.
- Eating too little or too much.

- Feeling like nothing will make you feel better.
- Having thoughts or plans of suicide.
- Having thoughts or plans of hurting yourself.
- Feeling anxious.
- Having trouble focusing on tasks or activities.
- Having pain, nausea (a feeling like you're going to throw up), headaches, or cramps.
- Feeling like everything is out of your control.

Some symptoms can be caused by medical issues or medication 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 "MSK Resources" section for help.

Tips for managing depression for caregivers

Depression can affect your mood, your health, and the care you provide to your loved one. This is why it's important to take care of yourself. Being a caregiver while making sure you have enough time to focus on your needs can be very hard.

Here are some tips that can help:

Take time for yourself

Balancing your own responsibilities with your caregiving role can make it feel impossible to take care of yourself. 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.

If you need to be a caregiver for a long period of time, you have to take care of yourself. This can help you feel better and 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, 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.

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.

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, take it. Feeling guilty about accepting help is normal, but needing support isn't a sign of weakness or failure. You'll take better care of your loved one and yourself the less overwhelmed you feel.

Do light physical activity

Light physical activity can help improve your mood and relieve stress. Get out into the fresh air and sunshine by going for a walk or a short bike ride. Talk with your doctor before starting new exercises.

Spend time with friends and family

Create a support system to stay connected to people who can support and talk with you about your experience. Depression and your caregiving responsibilities can make this feel hard to do. Having a support system can help lower stress and make you feel better.

Medication

If depression 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 depression. For more information, talk with your healthcare provider or call 646-888-0200 to make an appointment with the Counseling Center.

Depression 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 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988. You can also visit their website www.988lifeline.org to chat with a counselor online. You can contact the Lifeline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

If depression 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.

Support programs for depression at MSK

MSK offers many support options for caregivers. For more information about what MSK offers, visit www.mskcc.org/experience/caregivers-support/caregiver-services. Other organizations also offer educational and supportive resources. Read *A Guide for Caregivers* (www.mskcc.org/pe/guide-caregivers) for more information about other support services and caregiving tips.

No matter how you're feeling, we're here to support you. MSK has many support programs that can help you with depression:

In-person support groups

MSK's in-person support groups are led by cancer-focused social workers. Call the Department of Social Work at 212-639-7020 or email forcaregivers@mskcc.org to learn more.

Integrative medicine therapies at MSK

MSK's Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service provides services such as massages, acupuncture, yoga classes, reflexology, meditation, music therapy, and nutritional consults. These services are available to patients and caregivers. You'll need to pay for these services out-of-pocket. Call 646-449-1010 for more information, or visit www.mskcc.org/cancer-care/integrative-medicine to make an appointment.

Social Work

212-639-7020

www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/individual-family-counseling/social-work-experts

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.msk.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. Call 646-888-0200 for more information.

Location

MSK's Counseling Center
641 Lexington Avenue (on 54th Street between Lexington and Third avenues)
7th floor
New York, NY 10022

Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service

Our Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service offers many services to complement (go along with) traditional medical care. These include music therapy, mind/body therapies, dance and movement therapy, yoga, and touch therapy. To schedule an appointment for these services, call 646-449-1010.

You can also schedule a consultation with a healthcare provider in the Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service. They will work with you to come up with a plan for creating a healthy lifestyle and managing side effects. To make an appointment, call 646-608-8550.

Hours

Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Location

Bendheim Integrative Medicine Center
205 East 64th Street (on 64th Street between Second and Third avenues)
New York, NY 10065

Patient and Caregiver Education

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.msk.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. You may also find it comforting to speak with other caregivers in one of our online educational or support groups for caregivers.

If you're interested in joining a Virtual Program, visit www.msk.org/vp for more information.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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