Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Managing Depression During Cancer Treatment

This resource explains depression and how to manage it during cancer treatment.

About depression

Depression is a strong feeling of sadness. It's a common and normal response to cancer and cancer treatment. When you find out you have cancer, you're faced with many stressful and life-changing problems and fears. These include:

- Changes in your life plans and hopes for your future.
- Changes to your body and your self-esteem.
- Changes to your daily life.
- Concern about your loved ones who depend on you.
- Worry about what cancer treatment will be like.
- Worry about money and legal issues.
- Fear of dying.

If sadness gets in the way of your daily life, you may have depression. But depression isn't just feeling sad. Depression is a mood disorder that can be treated.

Symptoms of depression

Depression can affect people in different ways. Some people may have many symptoms, while others feel only a few.

It's important to know the symptoms of depression. These may include:

- Sleeping too little or too much.
- Eating too little or too much.
- Feeling sad, down, or hopeless.
- Feeling like nothing will make you feel better.
- Not enjoying activities you used to like.
- Having thoughts or plans of hurting yourself.
- Having thoughts or plans of suicide.
- Feeling very tired or having little energy.
- Feeling slowed down.
- Feeling anxious (worried or afraid).
- Having trouble staying focused on tasks or activities.
- Feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless.
- Having pain, nausea (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 problems or medicine you're taking. It's important to notice how you're feeling and talk with your care team. They can connect you to a mental health provider who can help you.

When to get help for depression

You may have a lot of different feelings throughout your cancer care. Your care team is here to support you. It's important to know when to get help.

Tell your doctor, nurse, or social worker right away if you have any of the following:

- Thoughts about death or suicide.
- Changes in sleep or appetite.
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy doing.
- Feelings that get in the way of your daily activities.
- Feeling confused.
- Trouble breathing.
- Sweating more than usual.
- Feeling very restless.
- Any other symptoms of depression that last for 2 weeks or more.

Depression can be treated. No matter how you're feeling, we're here to support you. We have resources that can help.

If you ever find yourself thinking about suicide, get help right away. 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.

What to do when you feel depressed

Here are some ways you can manage depression during cancer treatment.

- **Talk to your care team.** If you think you may have depression, talk with your healthcare provider. They can help connect you to the resources you need to start feeling better.
- **Get emotional support.** MSK has many providers, volunteers, and support programs that can help you cope with depression. You can contact any of the resources in the "Resources at MSK" section for help.
- **Join a group.** You may find comfort talking with other people going through cancer treatment in one of our support groups. Call our Counseling Center at 646-888-0200 or visit www.msk.org/counseling to learn more.
  We also offer online support groups through our Virtual Programs. Visit www.msk.org/vp to learn more.
- **Ask your doctor about taking medicine.** Medicine called antidepressants can help improve your mood and treat depression. To learn more, talk with your doctor or call 646-888-0200 to make an appointment with the Counseling Center.
- **Spend time with friends and family.** It's important to create a support system for yourself during cancer treatment. Depression can make this hard to do. But staying connected to people who can support and talk with you about your experience can help ease your worries.
- **Do some light physical activity, if you can.** Light physical activity can be going for a walk or a short bike ride. Physical activity can help improve your mood and ease stress. Talk to your doctor before starting new exercises.

MSK resources for depression

Social Work

212-639-7020
www.msk.org/socialwork

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.

If you want to join an online support group, visit the Virtual Programs website. Go to www.msk.org/vp to learn more and to sign up.

Counseling Center

646-888-0200
www.msk.org/counseling

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

Location

MSK's Counseling Center
Rockefeller Outpatient Pavilion
2nd Floor
160 E. 53rd St.
New York, NY 10022

Caregivers Clinic

646-888-0200
www.msk.org/caregivers

MSK's Caregivers Clinic provides support specifically for caregivers who are having trouble coping with the demands of being a caregiver. Call 646-888-0200 to learn more.

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Spiritual Care

212-639-5982
www.msk.org/spiritual-religious-care

At MSK, chaplains (spiritual counselors) 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 what religion you practice or follow.

MSK also has an interfaith chapel that's open to everyone. Ask your doctor or nurse or call 212-639-5982 to learn more.

Hours

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Interfaith Chapel Location

Memorial Hospital (near the main lobby)
1275 York Ave. (between 67th and 68th streets)
New York, NY 10065

Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service

646-449-1010
www.msk.org/integrativemedicine

Our Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service has many services to go along with traditional medical care. These include:

- Music therapy
- Mind/body therapies
- Dance and movement therapy
- Yoga
- Touch therapy

Call 646-449-1010 to make an appointment for these services.

You can also consult with a healthcare provider in the Integrative Medicine and Wellness Service. They will help you make a plan to create a healthy lifestyle and manage 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 St. (on 64th Street between Second and 3rd avenues)
New York, NY 10065

Resources for Life After Cancer (RLAC)

646-888-8106
www.msk.org/experience/living-beyond-cancer/services-survivors

At MSK, your care doesn't end when your treatment ends. The RLAC Program is for patients and their families who have finished treatment. This program has many services. These include:

- Seminars
- Workshops
- Support groups
- Counseling on life after treatment
- Help with insurance and work issues

Call 646-888-8106 to learn more.

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

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