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PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Managing Stress and Anxiety During COVID-19: Information for Cancer Survivors

It's normal to feel stressed, sad, or worried about COVID-19. The emotional, physical, and lifestyle changes we're going through may remind you and your family of your cancer treatment. Many people who are going through or went through cancer treatment see similarities between their experience with cancer and COVID-19, including:

- Feeling isolated (alone or away from friends and family)
- Worrying about germs
- Not being able to do some activities
- Missing out on social and life events or milestones
- Thinking about death and dying
- Worrying about the future
- Feeling helpless or like you don't have control over your life

COVID-19 may make you feel a lot of different things as a cancer survivor. You may feel closer to people who understand your experience with cancer. You may feel like you can cope with or manage social distancing easier than most people. You may also feel frustrated that these experiences are happening again after already going through treatment. You may have little patience for people complaining about social distancing. These are all normal reactions to what you're going through. It's okay to feel this way, but it's important to manage your stress and anxiety so you can stay safe and healthy during this time.

# Managing Stress and Anxiety During COVID-19

Remember, there's no right or wrong way to cope with the stress caused by COVID-19. Everyone deals with stress differently. Here are some things you can do to take care of yourself and manage your stress during this time. If you're a parent of a cancer survivor, read *Managing Stress and Anxiety During COVID-19: Information for Parents of Cancer Survivors* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/covid\\_parents](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/covid_parents)).

## Stay informed and safe

- **Stay informed.** It's important to stay updated on news related to COVID-19 related so you know what to do to stay healthy and safe. Make sure to get your information from reliable and trustworthy sources, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) and the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene ([www1.nyc.gov](http://www1.nyc.gov)) websites.
- **Disconnect from the news when you need to.** While it's important to stay updated with the news during this time, it can be overwhelming. Take breaks from watching, reading, and listening to the news, including social media, when you're feeling anxious.
- **Understand your risk.** Talk with your healthcare provider about your risk for COVID-19. While some cancer treatments can weaken your immune system, making it harder for your body to fight off diseases, your body usually recovers after treatment ends. Having a history of cancer doesn't put you at a higher risk for COVID-19, but you should still follow [CDC guidelines](#), such as [washing your hands often](#) and avoiding close contact with people who are sick or who live outside of your home, to protect yourself.
- **Focus on what you know and can do.** While there's a lot we don't know about COVID-19, focus on what you do know about the virus and how to protect yourself. Follow [CDC guidelines](#) and remember that you're more prepared to follow these guidelines than others, but also

that you're not in it alone this time.

## Take care of your body

- **Take care of your body.** Taking care of your body will make you feel better and help keep you from getting sick. Try to eat healthy meals, drink at least 6 to 8 (8-ounce) glasses of water a day, do some light physical activity (such as stretching), and get at least 7 hours of sleep.
  - Exercise with Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK)'s clinical fitness specialists by watching our [exercise video series](#). Videos include aerobics, strength training, core work, and gentle stretches.
  - Try tai chi with MSK's martial arts instructors by visiting [www.mskcc.org/taichi](http://www.mskcc.org/taichi). Tai chi is a gentle form of exercise that can be done at home to increase balance, steady breathing, and reduce anxiety.
- **Try relaxation techniques.** Relaxation techniques (such as taking deep breaths, stretching, and meditating) can help you manage stress.
  - Listen to free guided meditations to help you manage your stress, sleep better, and relax by visiting [www.mskcc.org/meditation](http://www.mskcc.org/meditation).
  - You can also try acupressure (putting pressure on parts of your body to help you relax). 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)).
  - There are also many applications (apps) you can download to your smart device (smartphone or tablet) to help you relax. Examples include Headspace, Breethe, Mindfulness, and Talkspace.

## Take care of your mind

- **Acknowledge your feelings.** Accept that this is a stressful time for everyone, especially people who have or had cancer. Remember that you're not alone in this. While you may be feeling overwhelmed, this is temporary. You may not know what the new normal will look like, but you will get back to your routines or make new ones.

- **Stay connected to your family and friends.** While you may not be able to be with your loved ones in person, you can call, text, and video chat with them. You may find it helpful to plan daily calls with your loved ones that you can look forward to. You can also try video chatting with your family during meals or to play games together.
- **Keep a routine.** While your daily routine may have changed, try to make a new one you can follow during this time. Set small goals for the day. Remember to schedule time to relax and disconnect from the news.
- **Start a new hobby.** If you're spending a lot of time at home, you can try a new hobby or do things you like to do that you didn't always have time for. You can read a book, do a puzzle, try out a new recipe, or watch a new TV show.
- **Get emotional support.** MSK has many professionals, volunteers, and support programs that can help you cope during this time. You can contact any of the resources in the "Resources at MSK" section.
  - You can join a support group for cancer survivors. MSK's Resources for Life after Cancer (RLAC) program has various support groups for people who have finished treatment. Ask your healthcare provider for more information about this program or call 646-888-8106.
  - You can also 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 stress, anxiety, and depression.

No matter how you're feeling, we're here to support you and we have resources that can help. 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](http://www.988lifeline.org) to chat with a counselor online. You can contact the Lifeline 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

# Resources at MSK

No matter where you are in the world, there is support available to you and your family. MSK offers a range of resources to help you manage stress and anxiety caused by COVID-19. Call your doctor's office for more information or to be connected to any of these resources.

## **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. Social workers are available at every MSK location. To talk with a social worker, call 212-639-7020.

If you're interested in joining an online support group, visit the Virtual Programs website at [www.mskcc.org/vp](http://www.mskcc.org/vp) for more information and to sign up.

## **Counseling Center**

646-888-0200

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

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, call 646-888-0200.

## **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 formal religious affiliation. MSK also has an interfaith chapel that's open to everyone. For more information, call 212-639-5982.

## **Integrative Medicine Service**

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

Our Integrative Medicine Service offers many services to complement (go along with) traditional medical care, including 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 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.

## **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.

## **Resources for Life After Cancer (RLAC)**

646-888-8106

[www.mskcc.org/experience/living-beyond-cancer/services-survivors](http://www.mskcc.org/experience/living-beyond-cancer/services-survivors)

At MSK, care doesn't end when your treatment is finished. The RLAC Program is for patients and their families who have finished treatment. This program has many services, including seminars, workshops, support groups, counseling on life after treatment, and help with insurance and employment issues. For more information, call 646-888-8106.

## **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 diagnosis, what to expect during treatment, and how to prepare for the various stages of your cancer care. Sessions are confidential, free, and led by expert clinical staff. If you're interested in joining a Virtual Program, visit our website at [www.mskcc.org/vp](http://www.mskcc.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](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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