

# Managing Mental Health With Cancer

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## Conflicts of Interest / Disclaimers

I have no conflicts of interest

I have no financial relationships to disclose

Information presented today is based on  
research and clinical experience



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## Objectives / Overview

Describe the mental health challenges that can result from a cancer diagnosis, cancer treatment, and survivorship

Describe how mental health symptoms can impact physical health

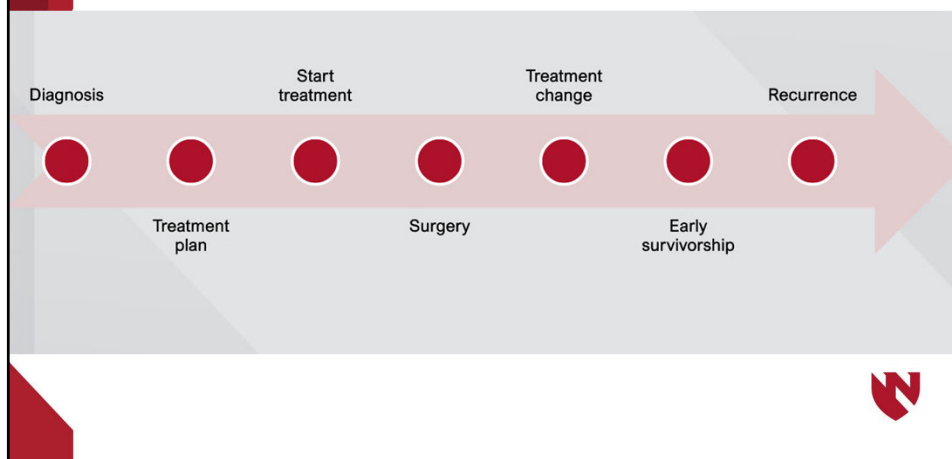
Describe multiple ways to improve mental health throughout all phases of the cancer process



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## Distress Through The Cancer Process

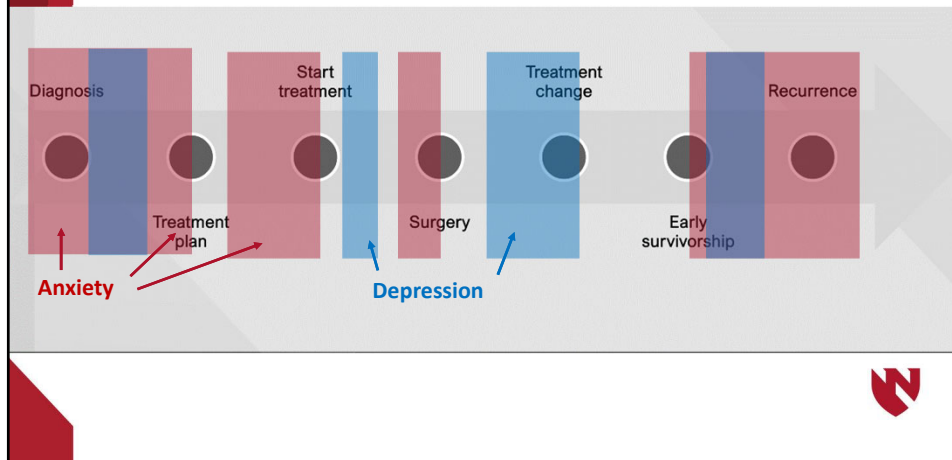
Distress can develop at **any time** through the process



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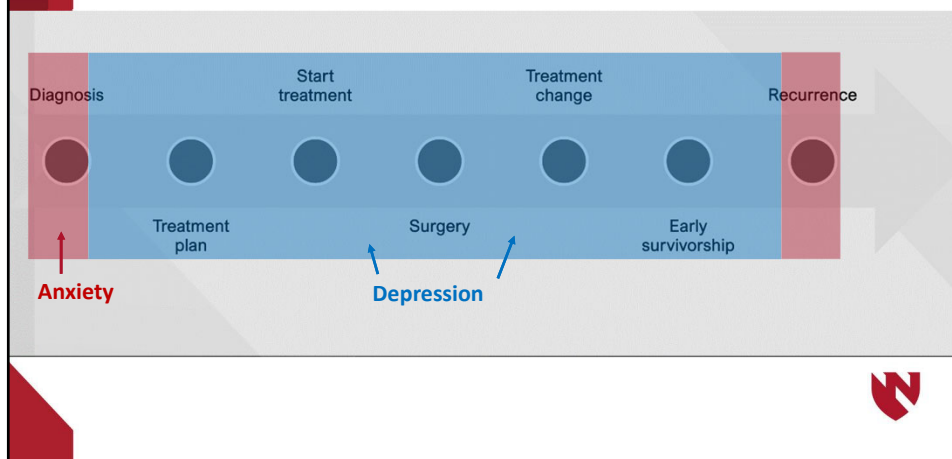
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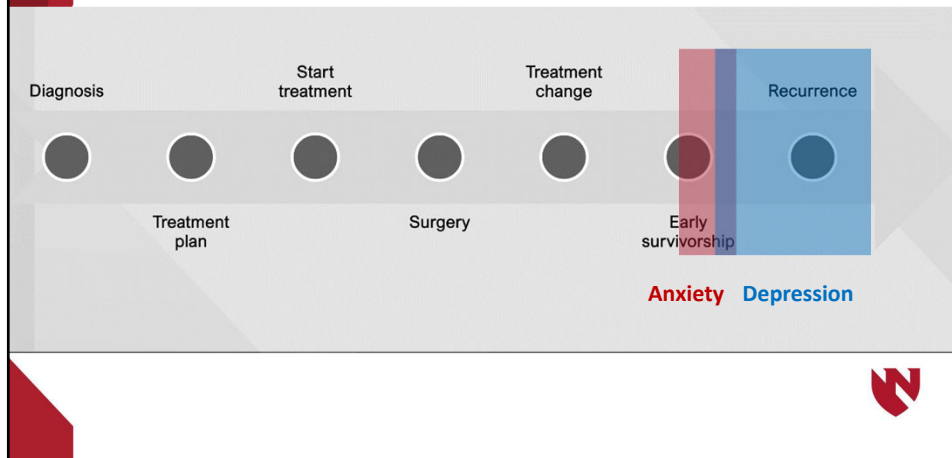
And can be different for different people



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## Distress Through The Cancer Process

And can be different for different people



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## Distress and Cancer

### How common is distress in cancer?

One study found that over **90%** of people (calling a cancer information hotline) were experiencing distress (Kirk et al., 2021)

Most common forms of distress include worry, fears, sadness, and sleep problems

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## Anxiety - Symptoms

Nearly **50%** of cancer survivors experience anxiety (Hashemi et al., 2020)

### Physical

- Rapid breathing/shortness of breath (respiratory), nervousness (GI symptoms), muscle tension (pain), dizziness, increased heart rate
- Panic attacks - extreme version



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## Anxiety - Symptoms

### Worry (“What if...”)

- Difficult to control
- Self-reinforcing
- Attempt to increase sense of control
- Attempt to manage uncertainty



Photo by Andrew Neal @ Pexels

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## Anxiety - Causes

- Uncertainty about the future
- Loss of control
- Loss of autonomy
- Sense of threat
- Fear of recurrence / progression



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## Depression - Definition

- Change in mood (sad, tearful, discouraged, irritable, frustrated)
- Low motivation
- Lack of enjoyment
- (Appetite changes, energy changes, sleep changes, lethargy, restlessness)

Up to **60%** of people going through cancer can experience depression  
(Mitchell et al., 2011)



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## Depression - Causes

- Loss of independence / autonomy
- Loss of functioning
- Loss of control
- Change in plans/goals
- Feeling like a burden / depending on others
- Bittersweet events
- Grieving for the future
- Inactivity
  - Inactivity ↔ depressed mood ↔ lowered motivation
- Chronic physical distress (pain, nausea, fatigue)



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## Depression - Symptoms

Appear unmotivated / reduced engagement in even low impact activity

- “What’s the point?”

Lack of positive emotion ("flat" / "numb")

Hopelessness

- Even those at end-of-life have hope

Suicidal thoughts



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## Depression - Causes

“I worked my whole life to be able to enjoy retirement, and now this...”

“I had just moved out from my parents’ house and started a job, and now I’m back”

“I want to see my grandchildren grow up”

“I don’t think I’ll ever feel like myself again”

“I did everything right, didn’t smoke, didn’t drink, exercised every day”

“I couldn’t even enjoy Christmas because I kept thinking ‘how many of these do I have left?’”



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## Depression - Symptoms

Symptoms of Major Depressive Disorder:

- Depressed mood most of the day, every day
- Loss of interest in activities
- Worthlessness or guilt
- Suicidal thoughts
- Weight or appetite changes
- Sleep changes (more or less)
- Fatigue
- Concentration difficulties
- Restlessness or lethargy



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## Insomnia - Symptoms

Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep that causes distress or impairment

Around 60% of cancer survivors have sleep difficulty at some point (Savard et al., 2011)

Savard et al., 2011



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## Insomnia - Symptoms

Difficulty falling asleep

- Negative thoughts, anxiety

Frequent awakenings / early awakenings

- Why (nightmares, bathroom, random?)
- How long to get back to sleep

Medical conditions should be ruled out (OSA, RLS, discomfort after surgery)

Katz et al., 2002



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## Insomnia - Causes

Most common (general population)

- Unknown cause (25%)
- Family stressors (23%) - separation, grief
- Health issues (23%) - pain, illness, restless legs
- Work / school (17%) - stress, night shifts
- Distress (12%) - depression, anxiety, substance use

Katz et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2012



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## Insomnia - Causes

Something (stress? pain?) causes short term sleep problems

Negative thoughts/emotions develop

Bed becomes associated with tossing and turning, frustration, and insomnia

Attempts to fix sleep backfire (changing bed/wake times, increased caffeine, alcohol use, napping, trying to "catch up")

Katz et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2012



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## Consequences of Untreated Distress



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## Untreated Distress

One form of distress can worsen others

- Anxiety can cause poor sleep
- Poor sleep can increase anxiety (vicious cycle)

Distress can cause

- Difficulty focusing
- Poor social functioning
- Worsened quality of life
- Increased health problems
- Reduced length of life



Barry et al., 2019

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## Treating Cancer-Related Distress



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## Anxiety – Treatment

Relaxation training

- **Deep breathing**, muscle relaxation, imagery, counting breaths, etc.

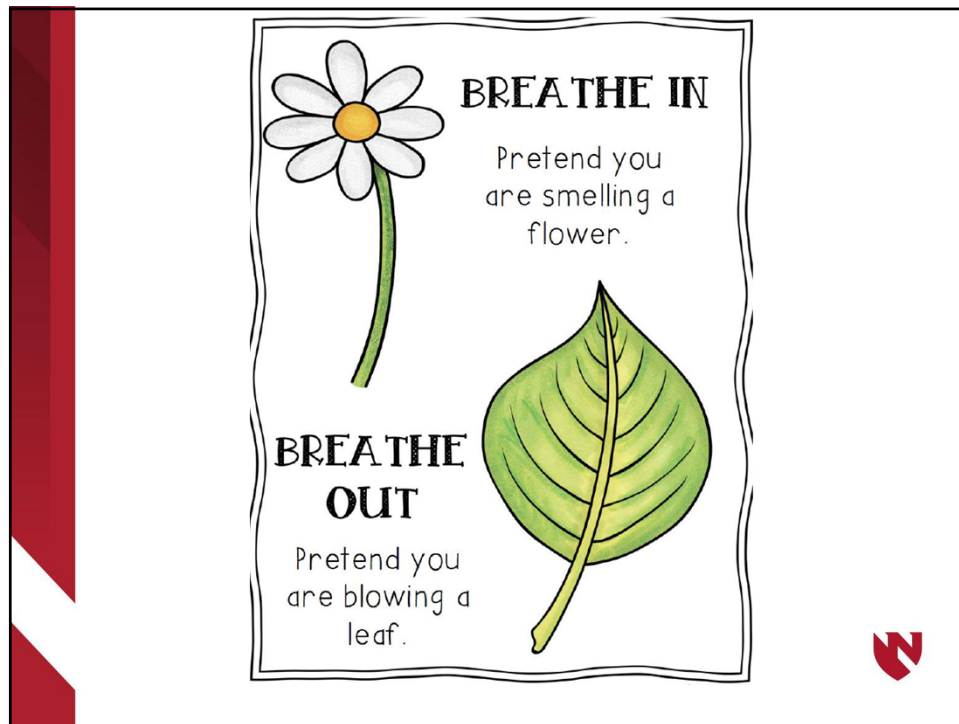
Triaging worries

- Controllable (take action) vs uncontrollable (next step)
  - Write down, discuss, and/or accept

Greer et al., 2011



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## Worry - Treatment

### Triaging worries

- Determine what is controllable vs uncontrollable
  - Controllable: Make a plan, delegate or take action
  - Uncontrollable: "I will cross that bridge"
- Write down, talk about them, and/or distance
- Distancing: **My mind is worried about my health** because **my health matters to me**. Is there **anything I can do** to help me feel healthy today?

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## Depression – Treatment

### Behavioral Activation

- Motivation may not 'just come back'
- "Do more, feel better"
- Hardest part: getting started
- Work around new limitations
  - High/low impact
  - Enjoyable/important
- Approximate values/goals/roles that cannot be achieved at this time

Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2020



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## Depression – Treatment

### Behavioral Activation

- Trying to break down values into smallest building blocks, and applying them to new, flexible areas of the patient's life

Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2020



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## Staying Engaged

We feel best when we are engaged in valued areas

### Relationships

- Reach out to friend, even via text

### Health

- Take a short walk every morning

### Spirituality

- Get back to church (even Zoom)

### Work

- Consider returning when ready

### Hobbies / interests / purpose

- Get sewing kit from downstairs



Ketut Subiyanto @ pexels

Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2020

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## Depression – Treatment

CEO forced to retire because of his health  
now works as a part-time consultant for  
struggling companies

Nature photographer facing 3-week  
hospitalization spent the time editing /  
organizing his albums in hospital

Small business owner forced to sell started  
teaching business classes at local  
community college

Fernández-Rodríguez et al., 2020



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## Insomnia - Treatment

### Neutralize sleep-related cognitions

- “The more I focus on calming myself, the better chance I will sleep”
- “I may be tired tomorrow, but I will be okay”
- “It takes time for sleep to improve”
- “Even if I have a bad night, it can teach me what works and what doesn’t”

Mitchell et al., 2012



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## Insomnia - Treatment

### Neutralize sleep-related cognitions

- The effects of sleep loss are often subtle & inconsistent
- It’s possible that changes attributed to sleep loss are related to **stress** instead
- In other words, **stress** could be just as disruptive to health and performance than sleep loss

Katz & McHorney, 2002



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## Insomnia - Treatment

### Practice good Sleep Hygiene

- Maintain consistent bed/wake times, routines
- Ensure a comfortable environment
- Get out of bed when not sleeping,
- Reappraise thoughts
- Use relaxation
- Avoid substances, big meals, excessive naps

Make small changes and stick with them for multiple days

Mitchell et al., 2012



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## How To Find Help

Use evidence-based coping skills outlined above

Your medical centers may have behavioral health providers who specialize in cancer care

Psychology Today website has therapist options

- Helpful even if they do not specialize in cancer

Educational programming (A Time To Heal!!) is widely available and often free

Support Groups - in-person or online



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## Medications

Something you take regularly (SSRI, SNRI) will be better in the long term than something you take as needed

- Escitalopram (Lexapro), duloxetine (Cymbalta), venlafaxine (Effexor), and vortioxetine (Trintellix)
- Trazodone for sleep (or melatonin OTC)

Will have to weigh your desire for improvement vs frustration of adding on a medication

Medications have been deemed safe and effective for those dealing with cancer (Zhao et al., 2024)



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## Summary

Distress is common in cancer

Distress can cause additional problems if untreated

There are many effective treatment options available (formal and informal)

- Engage in relaxation regularly
- Be proactive in managing your worries
- Push yourself to stay engaged in valued activities
- Get more help if needed



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