

Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)



Fact Sheet on Cancer and Mental Health

Introduction

The World Health Organization defines mental health as a state of well-being in which the individual realises his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community (World Health Organization).

[Mental Health 1]

Any serious illness can impact on someone's mental health. For patients, caregivers and their loved ones, going through cancer can be a devastating experience. Receiving a potentially fatal diagnosis, going through treatment protocols and learning to live with limitations can cause depression in many patients, as can the side effects from the treatment itself. Managing mental health needs of cancer patients is a crucial part of the treatment process and may even impact on prognosis (Spiegel 2013).



A study by Singer, *et al.*, (2013) looked into the prevalence of mental health conditions diagnosed in cancer patients of working age. The study identified that nearly 30 percent of the patients in their study were diagnosed with one or other mental health condition during the study. According to the study there was a noteworthy increase in the number of cancer patients who were diagnosed with one or other mental health condition.

Cancer and Mental Health

One out of three people diagnosed with cancer also wind up struggling with a mental health disorder such as anxiety or depression, a new study from Germany reports. Many people seem to cope with the natural stress of a cancer diagnosis, but for about 32 percent of cancer patients, the diagnosis may prompt a full-blown psychological disorder, said study lead author Anja Mehnert, a professor of psychosocial oncology at the University of Leipzig in Germany. (WebMD).

Chemo Brain and its Effect

Chemo brain is a common term used by cancer survivors to describe thinking and memory problems that can occur after cancer treatment. Chemo brain can also be called 'chemo fog', 'chemotherapy-related cognitive impairment' or 'cognitive dysfunction'. It is a symptom reported by many cancer patients. Chemo brain is a legitimate, diagnosable condition that may be caused by chemotherapy treatment, the cancer itself, or secondary medical conditions such as anaemia.

Symptoms of Chemo Brain include:

- Difficulty concentrating on a single task
- Problems with short-term memory; forgetting details of recent events
- Feeling mentally 'slower' than usual
- Confusing dates and appointments
- Misplacing objects
- Fumbling for the right word or phrase

These symptoms generally will fade after chemotherapy ends, but each patient is different. Some may take a year or more after treatment to feel normal again; others may never regain full cognitive function.

Not many treatments for chemo brain currently exist, although some patients may find relief from stimulants such as Ritalin®, commonly used to treat Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Ritalin can help improve mental focus, concentration and stamina in cancer patients.

People can use the following coping strategies to minimise the effects of chemo brain:

- Exercise - Even five minutes of mild to moderate activity may improve mental function
- Memory Aids - Using a notebook, planner or list to keep track of things as they come to mind. A small recorder can also come in handy
- Treat fatigue and sleep problems - these conditions can worsen chemo brain symptoms
- Manage depression and anxiety - easing stress and elevating mood can ease chemo brain symptoms
- Minimise distractions - A more soundproof environment, like an office or a cubicle in a different location can decrease distractions and improve concentration in the workplace

(MD Anderson Cancer Center; Mayo Clinic).

Distress

Nearly half of cancer patients report experiencing a lot of distress. According to the Yale Cancer Centre, patients with lung, pancreatic and brain cancers may be more likely to report distress, but in general, the type of cancer does not make a difference. Factors that increase the risk of anxiety and distress are not always related to the cancer.

The following may be risk factors for high levels of distress in patients with cancer:

- Trouble doing the usual activities of daily living
- Physical symptoms and side effects (such as fatigue, nausea, or pain)
- Problems at home
- Depression or other mental or emotional problems
- Being younger, non-white, or female
- Having a lower level of education

(Yale Cancer Centre).

Dealing with an illness as serious as cancer is no small matter. A cancer diagnosis is often accompanied by swift and aggressive treatment and it is all but expected that a person will be overwhelmed, worried, fearful and anxious while doctors focus on their medical well-being.

It is true that anxiety and depression are two very real and very common consequences of a cancer diagnosis. Although expected to occur, these two conditions should not be ignored. Addressing the mental health needs of cancer patients at all ages is essential and counselling for cancer patients is valuable for its own sake. It does go a step further: failing to address these concerns may actually decrease the patient's odds of recovery. (GoodTherapy.Org).

Each Cancer Patient is Unique as far as Levels of Distress are Concerned

Some patients living with cancer have a low level of distress and others have higher levels of distress. The level of distress ranges from being able to adjust to living with cancer to having a serious mental health problem, such as major depression. However, many patients with cancer do not have signs or symptoms of any specific mental health problem. The less severe levels of distress in patients living with cancer include:

- Normal adjustment - a condition in which a person makes changes in his or her life to manage a stressful event such as a cancer diagnosis. In normal adjustment, a person learns to cope well with emotional distress and solve problems related to cancer
- Psychological and social distress - a condition in which a person has some trouble making changes in their life to manage a stressful event such as a cancer diagnosis. Help from a professional to learn new coping skills may be needed
- Adjustment disorder - a condition in which a person has a lot of trouble making changes in his or her life to manage a stressful event such as a cancer diagnosis. Symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or other emotional, social, or behavioural problems occur and worsen the person's quality of life. Medicine and help from a professional to make these changes may be needed
- Anxiety disorder - a condition in which a person has extreme anxiety. It may be the result of a stressful event like a cancer diagnosis or for no known reason. Symptoms of anxiety disorder include worry, fear and trepidation. When the symptoms are severe, it affects a person's ability to lead a normal life. There are many types of anxiety disorders.
- Generalised anxiety disorder:
 - Panic disorder (a condition that causes sudden feelings of panic)
 - Agoraphobia (fear of open places or situations in which it might be hard to get help if needed)
 - Social anxiety disorder (fear of social situations)
 - Specific phobia (fear of a specific object or situation)

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder

(Yale Cancer Center).

Anxiety and Stress Among Cancer Patients

Patients living with cancer feel many different emotions, including anxiety and distress:

- Anxiety is fear, trepidation and uneasiness caused by stress
- Distress is emotional, mental, social, or spiritual suffering

[Picture Credit: Mental Health 2]



Patients who are distressed may have a range of feelings from vulnerability and sadness to depression, anxiety, panic and isolation.

Patients may have feelings of anxiety and distress while being screened for cancer, waiting for the results of tests, receiving a cancer diagnosis, being treated for cancer, or worrying that cancer will recur (come back).

Anxiety and distress may affect a patient's ability to cope with a cancer diagnosis or treatment. It may cause patients to miss check-ups or delay treatment. Anxiety may increase pain, affect sleep and cause nausea and vomiting. Even mild anxiety can affect the quality of life for cancer patients and their families and may need to be treated (National Cancer Institute).

Research shows that if receiving a diagnosis of cancer results in clinical depression or anxiety or significantly impacts on a person's mental health. It can also negatively impact the health outcomes and quality of life of patients during their treatment.

Factors responsible for increased depression and anxiety include:

- Treatment modalities for cancer, including chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, as well as side effects of various medications, can contribute to the development of major depression and/or anxiety
- Being diagnosed with a serious illness can cause psychological stressors, such as fear of future outcomes, body image concerns, dealing with the emotional effects of treatment and how undergoing treatment will impact one's life, including a person's ability to work, which can contribute to financial concerns
- Individuals with a prior history of depression, a family history of psychiatric illness, or a poor social support system, are at higher risk of developing depression upon being diagnosed with a serious illness

(Butler Hospital).

Anxiety and the Treatment of Anxiety

Anxiety is the body's natural response to danger, an automatic alarm that goes off when one feels threatened, under pressure, or are facing a stressful situation.

[Picture Credit: Anxiety]



In moderation, anxiety isn't always a bad thing. In fact, anxiety can help one stay alert and focused, spur one to action and motivate one to solve problems. But when anxiety is constant or overwhelming, or when it interferes with one's relationships and activities, it stops being functional – that is when one has crossed the line from normal, productive anxiety into the territory of anxiety disorders.

Symptoms that may indicate an anxiety disorder - if a person shows several of the following signs and symptoms, and it just will not go away, that person may be suffering from an anxiety disorder:

- Being constantly tense, worried or on edge
- Interference with work, school or family responsibilities
- Being plagued by fears that is known to be irrational, but cannot shake off
- Believing that something bad will happen if certain things are not done a certain way
- Avoiding everyday situations or activities because they cause anxiety
- Sudden, unexpected attacks of heart-pounding panic
- A feeling of danger and catastrophe around every corner

Because anxiety disorders are a group of related conditions rather than a single disorder, it can look very different from person to person. One individual may suffer from intense anxiety attacks that strike without warning, while another gets panicky at the thought of mingling at a party. Someone else may struggle with a disabling fear of driving, or uncontrollable, intrusive thoughts. Yet another may live in a constant state of tension, worrying about anything and everything.

Despite its different forms, all anxiety disorders share one major symptom: persistent or severe fear or worry in situations where most people would not feel threatened.

Emotional symptoms of anxiety – in addition to the primary symptoms of irrational and excessive fear and worry, other common emotional symptoms of anxiety include:

- Feelings of apprehension or fear
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling tense and jumpy
- Anticipating the worst
- Irritability
- Restlessness
- Watching for signs of danger
- Feeling like one's mind has gone blank

Physical symptoms of anxiety – anxiety is more than just a feeling. As a product of the body's fight-or-flight response, anxiety involves a wide range of physical symptoms. Because

of the numerous physical symptoms, anxiety sufferers often mistake their disorder for a medical illness. They may visit doctors and make numerous trips to the hospital before their anxiety disorder is discovered.

Common physical symptoms of anxiety include:

- Pounding heart
- Sweating
- Stomach upset or dizziness
- Frequent urination or diarrhoea
- Shortness of breath
- Tremors and twitches
- Muscle tension
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Insomnia

(Helpguide.org).

Depression and its Treatment

Depression in cancer survivors is a major concern and is associated with poor health related quality of life (HRQOL). Delaying or forgoing care due to depression may further augment poor HRQOL. Although several studies have documented depression as a barrier to healthcare utilisation in non-cancer populations, the impact of current depression on health care utilisation among adult cancer survivors (ACS) has not been fully elucidated.

Research findings have implications for future studies to further understand the association between depression and health care utilisation among ACS, its impact on their overall wellbeing, and efforts to detect and treat depression in ACS. Routine assessment of depression in ACS and effective treatment interventions may aid in seeking timely and appropriate medical care.

Just as no two people are affected exactly the same way by depression, there is no 'one size fits all' treatment that cures depression. What works for one person might not work for another. The best way to treat depression is to become as informed as possible about the treatment options, and then tailor them to meet your needs.

[Picture Credit: Depression]

Depression treatment tips:

- Learn as much as possible about depression – it is important to determine whether the depression symptoms are due to an underlying medical condition. If so, that condition will need to be treated first. The severity of depression is also a factor. The more severe the depression, the more intensive the treatment is likely to be
- It takes time to find the right treatment - it might take some trial and error to find the treatment and support that works best. For example, if it is decided to pursue therapy it important to find a therapist that the patient will click with.
- Do not rely on medications alone - although medication can relieve the symptoms of depression, it is not always suitable for long-term use. Other treatments, including exercise and therapy, can be just as effective as medication, often even more so, but do not come with unwanted side effects. If the decision is to treat with medication, it must be remembered that medication works best when one makes healthy lifestyle changes as well



- Get social support. If feeling stuck, do not hesitate to talk to trusted family members or friends, or seek out new connections at a depression support group, for example. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness. Often, the simple act of talking to someone face to face can be an enormous help
- Treatment takes time and commitment - most depression treatments take time, and sometimes it might feel overwhelming or frustratingly slow. That is normal. Recovery usually has its ups and downs

(Helpguide.org; Cheruvu & Oancea).

Treating Depression and Anxiety Disorders

As with any illness, treatment should be tailored to a specific diagnosis. A treatment plan for a diagnosis of depression and an anxiety disorder should be designed to help a person manage and reduce the symptoms of both disorders, often at the same time.

Some people may have a disorder that causes most of the distress, and it is reasonable to address it first. For example, if a person who is highly depressed is unable to begin treatment for an anxiety disorder, which requires high motivation and energy, it may be necessary to treat the depression first. Often, however, it is difficult to tell which set of symptoms is predominant, so treatment of both may start at the same time.

Often depression and an anxiety disorder can be treated similarly. In many cases, therapy can be tailored to an individual so that it works to reduce the symptoms of both disorders.

Several forms of psychotherapy are effective. Of these, cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) works to replace negative and unproductive thought patterns with more realistic and useful ones. These treatments focus on taking specific steps to overcome anxiety and depression. Treatment often involves facing one's fears as part of the pathway to recovery. Interpersonal therapy and problem-solving therapy are also effective.

Medications can also be useful. Symptoms of depression and anxiety disorders often occur together and research shows that both respond to treatment with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) and serotonin norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor (SNRI) medications.

Other medications may be used if an SSRI or SNRI does not provide adequate improvement. For people with severe symptoms or functional limitations, psychotherapy and medication treatment may be combined.
(Anxiety and Depression Association).

What Patients can do to Alleviate Cancer-related Depression

Mental health is just as important as a healthy body. Caring for oneself at a time of cancer treatment may be difficult. Below are some recommended tools to make this easier.

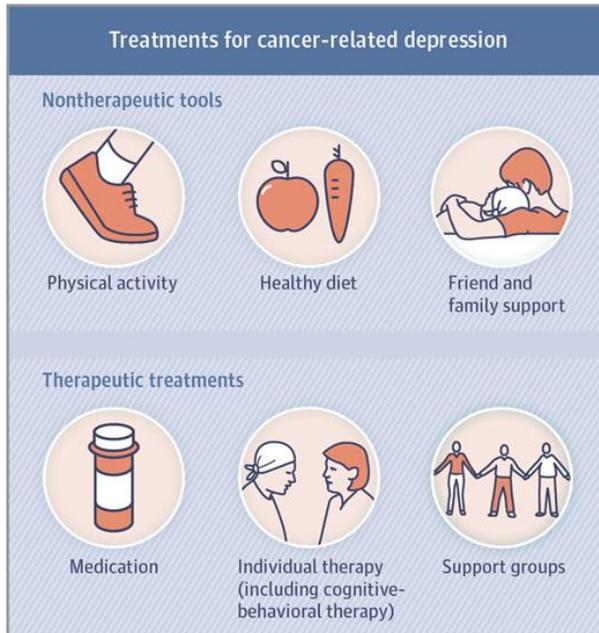
Nontherapeutic Tools

- Physical activity has positive effects on both mood and the body and can greatly reduce stress. Any level of physical activity can be beneficial to your emotional and mental health.
- A balanced diet can also help improve your mood and reduce stress. A nutritionist can help with establishing a healthy diet during treatment.

- Maintaining a healthy support network with friends and family can help you cope with cancer-related life changes.

Therapeutic Treatment

- Medication prescribed by a doctor can be used to manage depression symptoms.
- Support groups, led by a social worker, clinical therapist, psychiatrist, or psychologist, can be helpful when coping with cancer-related depression.



(Pokorney & Bates, 2017).

- Individual therapy is another great tool to help overcome depression. Private sessions with a social worker, clinical therapist, psychologist, or psychiatrist can help treat cancer-related depression.

- Cognitive-behavioural therapy is a type of therapy that helps patients identify and manage emotions and thoughts. Cognitive-behavioural therapy has been proven effective in managing depression.

Good places to start searching for a mental health professional include asking one's treating oncologist for a referral.

The Psychological Price of Survivorship

Survivorship comes at a psychological price. Some of the major issues include:

The 'Damocles syndrome' - according to Greek legend, once Damocles realised that a sword was dangling precariously over his head, he could no longer enjoy the banquet spread in front of him. In the same way, the sceptre of cancer hangs over some cancer survivors. They can become emotionally paralysed and have a hard time deciding to get married, change jobs, or make other major decisions.

Fear of recurrence - given cancer's potential to lay dormant for a while and then spread (metastasis), cancer survivors often experience ongoing fear of recurrence. Follow-up medical visits, unexplained pain, or even sights and sounds they associate with treatment can trigger bouts of anxiety and fear that are as debilitating as those that occurred immediately following diagnosis and/or during cancer treatment.

Survivor guilt - although happy to be alive, cancer survivors may feel guilty that they survived while fellow patients they became friendly with during treatment or as part of a support group did not. Early after a diagnosis of cancer, people first ask, "Why me?" When survivors think about those who have died, they tend to ask, "Why not me?" (Harvard Medical School).

Signs and Symptoms of Mental Health Problems

The first signs of mental health problems will differ from person to person and are not always easy to spot. In many cases of moderate depression or anxiety – the most common mental health problems – the person becoming distressed may not display symptoms, or may seek to hide them because they worry about what others will say or think about them.

[Picture Credit: Mental Health]

The signs can often be more noticeable to other people first: for instance, if the person's mood starts changing, it may take some time for the patient him/herself to become aware of it; other people may be much more conscious of the difference.



Some common early signs of a mental health problem are:

- Losing interest in activities and tasks that were previously enjoyed
- Poor performance at work
- Mood swings that are very extreme or fast and out of character for the particular person
- Self-harming behaviour, such as cutting oneself
- Changes in eating habits and/or appetite: over-eating, bingeing, not eating
- Loss of, or increase in, sexual desire
- Sleep problems
- Increased anxiety, looking or feeling 'jumpy' or agitated, sometimes including panic attacks
- Feeling tired and lacking energy
- Isolating oneself, socialising less
- Spending too much time in bed
- Wanting to go out a lot more, needing very little sleep, feeling highly energetic, creative and sociable, making new friends rapidly, trusting strangers or spending excessively
- Hearing and seeing things that others don't
- Other differences in perception; for example, mistakenly believing that someone is trying to harm one, is laughing at one, or trying to take over one's body

All of these signs can vary in severity. Often they can be relatively minor, or pass quickly. However, if they are particularly severe or distressing, or continue for more than a short while, the person may need to seek support. (Mind.org).

Practical Tips to Help Throughout Cancer Treatment

According to the Moores Cancer Center, UC San Diego, living with a serious disease is not easy. They provide the following practical tips to help patients throughout their treatment:

- Adopt a fighting spirit
- It is 'OK' to discourage false cheerfulness and to share how one really feels
- Seek support from family and friends

- Being a member of one's own healthcare team, one must learn about one's condition and ask questions
 - Be an active participant in own treatment and recovery efforts
 - Make positive lifestyle changes that will improve outcomes, such as quitting smoking, eating a healthy and balanced diet, whilst incorporating physical activity and exercise into one's daily life
 - Find something to laugh about each day – good humour is healthy for the body and soul
 - For safety sake, when not feeling well, ask for transportation assistance to medical appointments
 - Participate in a support group and learn from others
 - Pay attention to how one is feeling and get plenty of rest and take time for personal care
 - Find ways to express feelings by speaking with a mental health provider or social worker
 - Consider complementary therapies, such as massage and aromatherapy to help relieve stress and other symptoms
 - Continue doing the things that one enjoys
 - Continue current sports and other activities as much as is physically possible
 - Allow for private time apart from family and friends to do nothing, or something important to oneself
 - If currently employed, continue working as long as possible
 - Get spiritual nourishment through prayer, meditation or guidance from a religious leader
 - Listen to music that one finds relaxing – music that can bring about serenity
 - Reading uplifting literature
 - Remaining close to a significant person in one's life – if there is romance, keep the romance going
 - Take time for simple pleasures, such as a warm bath, manicure or pedicure
 - Informing one's caregiver(s) when in need of help
 - Keep in mind that one's memory function and energy levels may fluctuate depending on treatment and medication
 - Writing one's feelings in a journal
 - Keeping a calendar or log of activities and appointment to help stay organised.
- (UC San Diego, Moores Cancer Center).

Brain Health and Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Omega-3 fatty acids are considered essential fatty acids: It is necessary for human health but the body can't make it – it needs to be obtained from food. Omega-3 fatty acids can be found in fatty fish such as salmon, tuna, sardines, mackerel, trout and snoek. Plant sources include walnuts, flaxseeds, canola, pumpkin and sesame seeds, green leafy vegetables, legumes and fruits such as citrus, melons and cherries (in season). It can also be found in some sea plants as well as algae and krill.

Also known as polyunsaturated fatty acids (PUFAs), omega-3 fatty acids play a crucial role in brain function, as well as normal growth and development. It has also become popular because it may reduce the risk of heart disease and certain cancers.

More recent research shows that omega-3 fatty acids reduce inflammation and may help lower risk of chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer and arthritis. Omega-3 fatty

acids are highly concentrated in the brain and appear to be important for cognitive (brain memory and performance) and behavioural function. In fact, infants who do not get enough omega-3 fatty acids from their mothers during pregnancy are at risk for developing vision and nerve problems. Symptoms of omega-3 fatty acid deficiency include fatigue, poor memory, dry skin, heart problems, mood swings or depression, as well as poor circulation.

It is important to have the proper ratio of omega-3 and omega-6 (another essential fatty acid) in the diet. Omega-3 fatty acids help reduce inflammation, and most omega-6 fatty acids tend to promote inflammation. The typical diet tends to contain 14 - 25 times more omega-6 fatty acids than omega-3 fatty acids, which many nutritionally oriented physicians consider to be way too high on the omega-6 side.

The Mediterranean diet, on the other hand, has a healthier balance between omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. Many studies have shown that people who follow this diet are less likely to develop heart disease and certain cancers. The Mediterranean diet emphasises foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, including whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, fish, olive oil and garlic.

(University of Maryland Medical Center; Cape Peninsula University of Technology; American Journal of Clinical Nutrition).

Look out for Omega-3 products obtained from a natural source that are free of any heavy metals and low in rancidity.

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