

Burden/Worry



“A lot of the medical appointments are stressful; not just the appointments themselves but the weeks leading up to them and the anxiety about what the outcome might be... When you’re all wound up you tend to forget to breathe and don’t do it. Breathing properly is one of the best things I’ve found to help calm me down.”

Rita
diagnosed with colorectal cancer

How does this affect me?

The journey with cancer can involve feelings of worry, frustration, fear and uncertainty. It is not uncommon to worry about the future when you first receive a cancer diagnosis and to wonder about the impact it may have on you and your loved ones. You may feel stress and worry when choosing between cancer treatments or when facing the financial, emotional, and physical toll of these treatments. Cancer affects your friends and family as well and you may worry that you are a burden to your loved ones. Worrying involves having negative thoughts about something you fear might happen in the future. However, worrying can be helpful if these thoughts propel you to a positive action such as when you ask for help and seek information. For example, you may be worried you will forget to ask the doctor an important question—a positive action would be to write questions down to bring to your doctor’s appointment so that you feel more prepared and ready to make decisions about your health.

Stress and worry can be harmful when it leads to negative actions or when it becomes a recurrent event that interrupts your day-to-day activities. If you are worried about the future, your journey with cancer and next steps of treatment, or about asking your loved ones for help, it is possible for you to learn strategies that reduce worry and help lessen the body’s stress reaction. These are described in further detail in following sections. However, if you don’t feel able to manage the worry yourself and you feel “frozen” and unable to do the things you want to do, don’t hesitate to contact a psychosocial professional like a social worker or psychologist. You can also ask your healthcare team to direct you to resources for help.



What can I do to manage my worry?

One of the negative effects of persistent worry is that it triggers a stress response from the brain to the rest of your body. Your body goes into ‘fight or flight’ mode, ready to face any threat you may encounter. This response keeps you in high alert mode which can put a lot of strain on your mind and body if continuous over time. You can fight against this stress response by practicing relaxation strategies and positive thinking when you begin to feel worried or even before you encounter a stressful situation. This can help relieve some of your tension and ultimately signal the brain to turn off your stress response. Find the strategies that suit you best and practice them until you feel comfortable with them.



Practice relaxation strategies

Finding ways to relax can help your mind and body. These easy relaxation strategies can be done anywhere!

- Even a few minutes of deep breathing can help your body relax. Try breathing exercises such as slow, deep, counted breathing.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** This involves tensing and relaxing a muscle, or groups of muscles, one at a time.
- **Guided imagery or visualization.** Imagine being in a place that makes you feel calm in real life. You can use a recording to guide your visualization or find help from a trained instructor.
- **Massage therapy.** Use a certified massage therapist who has experience working with cancer patients.
- **Mindfulness meditation:** This can help you adapt to stress and anxiety and let go of worries.
- For more information see [Relaxation strategies](#).

Challenge your self-talk

Challenging your thoughts of worry and fear can be helpful to change your perspective. This technique involves becoming aware of any unhelpful or negative thoughts that you replay or say to yourself. Once you become aware of these thoughts, you can challenge them by assessing whether or not it is an accurate or true thought. Follow these steps to practice challenging your self-talk.

1. **Pay attention to your feelings:** what has triggered your negative feelings?
2. **Pay attention to your thoughts (self-talk):** ask yourself, is there proof that this is an accurate thought?
3. **Challenge the unhelpful self-talk by asking yourself:**
 - Could this thought be overly negative or exaggerated?
 - Does this thought undermine how well I may be able to cope or solve the problem?
 - What would I say to my best friend if they shared this same thought with me about themselves?
4. **Replace your self-talk:** Be realistic and replace the unhelpful thought with a more realistic one. You do not need to be overly positive, rather be more realistic.

Here is an example of challenging one's self-talk:

Thought: "I am putting so many demands on my wife and she must be fed up"

Challenge: "Perhaps this is not exactly how she feels since she hasn't told me so. If my best friend expressed this thought, I would say that it is normal to feel a bit overwhelmed but he is doing as much as he can to support his wife emotionally."

Replacement self-talk: "My wife has not mentioned she is fed up. I am still helping out and doing the tasks I can. I will talk to her about how I feel and ask her how she feels so that we both feel supported."



Simple tasks to help refocus your mind

Consider how much energy goes into the negative and unhelpful thoughts that won't go away. You can take this emotional energy and use it towards completing smaller doable tasks. This can help you feel better as you accomplish simple tasks and it can act as a distraction from your worries. You can make a list of simple tasks around the home. Do not put pressure on yourself to do everything on your list – do the tasks that help take your mind off of your worries. Here are examples of tasks to consider:

- Reorganize your closet
- Fold some laundry
- Fix a knob on a drawer
- Clean one room or area in your house



Mental tasks as a distraction

Mental tasks are activities that keep your brain busy for a short while so that you can be distracted from worry and stress. Distraction does not solve the problem nor remove all your worries but it can be a helpful strategy to shift your focus to something else for a while. Examples of mental tasks are:

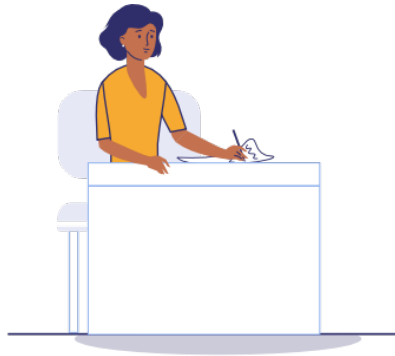
- Counting your breaths
- Doing mental arithmetic such as multiplication tables or counting back from 100 by 3s or 7s
- Working on a crossword puzzle or sudoku
- Reading a book



Postpone your worry

A short term but effective way to deal with worry is to delay it for a later time in the day. This technique can help you feel more in control as you choose not to focus on a worry until that chosen time when you will devote time to it.

- Pick a time when you will 'get your worrying done' and try to stick to this as much as possible. When worrying thoughts come up during the day, remind yourself that you can delay thinking about them and that you have a designated time for when you will deal with these concerns.
- You can write your thoughts down and tell yourself that you will come back to them later. It is also important to let go of these worrying thoughts as much as possible once the designated time is up. Use the hour you have chosen to try and come up with solutions and ways to deal with your concerns. You may feel that some things are still unresolved but try not to focus on these until your next worry period.



What help do I need to worry less?



Keep a symptom diary

It can be very helpful to write your thoughts and feelings down on paper to keep track of them. Some people find that it is easier to let go of worrying thoughts once they've written them down. Journaling can be a relaxing exercise if you enjoy writing. Keep in mind that your journal is only for you and will not be judged or graded so you can feel free to list all your stressors in paragraphs, bullet point form, or with drawings. The important thing is to have a healthy outlet where you can express your emotions.

Get involved in a hobby or a relaxing activity

You can make a list of activities or hobbies that you are interested in and give some of these a try. This can be relaxing as it distracts you from your present thoughts and allows you to return to your daily activities with a refreshed mind and a more realistic outlook. These activities and hobbies are things you can do alone or with your loved ones. It can remind you that you can still enjoy life and that not every moment needs to be focused on worrying or problem-solving. Choose activities or outlets you can use to express your emotions. These can include:

- Playing a sport
- Playing an instrument or listening to music
- Going out for a walk
- Listening to a podcast
- Developing a new interest or hobby or joining a class to discover new interests
- Reading a book



Where can I find help?

Friends and family

- Don't be afraid to lean on your family and friends. People are often happy to help, but may not know where to start. Give yourself permission to ask for and accept help. You may be afraid that you will burden your family or friends. If this is a concern you have, talk to them and ask them how they feel and if what you are asking of them is too much. Sometimes we think we are a burden to others when in reality we are not. The simplest way to know if you are asking too much of someone is to ask.
- Ask your family and friends to write down what help they can offer. This will make it easier for them and for you to know what you can ask of them. It can be easier for you to reach out for help if you know exactly who to ask and what you can ask of them – be it help with getting groceries, going to an appointment, or doing small tasks at home.

Your healthcare team

- Your emotional wellbeing and mental health are important aspects of your general health. Consider asking your doctor for a referral to a psychosocial professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker to help you with the challenges you are facing. They can be very helpful in discovering ways to manage your worries and anxiety during this time and they can teach you skills that will help you manage these feelings in the future.
- Counseling services may also be provided by a spiritual care worker, or some nurses in your treatment center. Ask your healthcare team for recommendations and more information.



Other kinds of support

- Support groups can provide information and resources for people going through similar experiences. These can be in person, via phone, or online. You can learn about other coping strategies by talking to others who have had a similar experience to yours. Your healthcare team can suggest possible groups for you.
- The Canadian Cancer Society offers a free program that matches people dealing with cancer with trained volunteers who have had a similar cancer experience. They are there to listen, offer hope, and support with the challenges you may be facing. Check out match.cancer.ca or call 1 888 939-3333 for more information.
- [Fondation Québécoise du cancer](#): Call the Info-cancer hotline (1 800 363-0063). This hotline is for both patients and their loved ones to have a confidential conversation with a nurse who can direct you where to go to meet your needs.



What can I do to look after myself?

Looking after yourself will make you feel better in general and will free up more energy to tackle the challenges you face. Start with the basics:



Plan what you eat

Good nutrition will help your body feel better and help maintain your energy as you go through treatment.

- You might need more energy or calories during treatment to maintain your body weight.
- Drink 2-3 litres of liquids to prevent dehydration, especially on days when you are unable to eat.
- Protein can help your body heal and maintain a healthy immune system. It is found in fish, poultry, eggs, nuts, dried beans, cheese, and lean red meat.
- Check with your healthcare team to find out if there any foods or beverages that you should avoid.
- For further information see [Looking after yourself](#).



Stay active

Exercise can help strengthen your body and help you clear your mind as you undergo cancer treatments.

- Choose an activity you like to do either alone or with a family member or friend.
- Walking, light stretching, or breathing exercises can help your body and mind feel better.
- In general, light exercise can be done while you are undergoing treatment but check with your healthcare provider before starting a new exercise routine. For more information see the [Le GO pour bouger!](#) program.
- For further information see [Looking after yourself](#).



Practice good sleep habits

A good night's sleep can help your body and mind feel better.

- Try to keep a regular bedtime routine and minimize distractions before going to bed. For example, turn off your electronics and choose a quiet place to sleep.
- Avoid drinking caffeine or alcohol close to bedtime.
- Try relaxation strategies before you go to bed or listen to soothing music.

Resources

You can find more information on managing feelings of worry, uncertainty, and stress in the resources below.

[Canadian Cancer Society – Coping with anxiety and stress](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Sleep problems](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Eating well](#)

[Info-aidant](#) is open every day from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. to listening, and provide information and references. info-aidant@lappui.org 1 855 852-7784

Acknowledgement of sources

The content of this document has been adapted from the following sources:

- Canadian Cancer Society. Coping when you have cancer. 2019.
- Coping Together. Dealing with Stress and Worry. 2013.
- TEMPO. Feeling worried or uncertain. 2018.

Healthcare professional endorsement

The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by a team of healthcare professionals and clinical experts.

Disclaimer

Please note that this fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare professional. If you have questions about your health, or any medical issue, you should contact a healthcare professional right away. You should not delay seeking medical advice, or disregard professional medical advice, because of information in this fact sheet. Before beginning any health treatment, always consult your doctor. All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. e-IMPAQc is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of, or related to, any use of the fact sheet, or because of any errors or omissions.

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