

# Depression



“I had tears often after my treatment. Me, who thought I was a superwoman. I had a little bit of depression. I spent about two weeks in a row crying. My oldest daughter used to phone me and say, “Mommy, there is something wrong with you.” I didn’t even realize the state I was in.”

**Sylvie**  
**Diagnosed with breast cancer**

## What is cancer-related depression?

Feeling sad is a normal part of life, especially when faced with a difficult situation such as a cancer diagnosis. When you have depression, however, your feelings of sadness are stronger and last longer. They also interfere with your ability to function. You may notice physical or mental changes. These can include a drop in energy or the ability to think clearly.

- **How does it affect me?** Depression can throw off your ability to cope with challenges. These challenges might include pain and other cancer symptoms. Many people diagnosed with cancer may have a low mood. However, this becomes a problem when the low mood becomes constant and brings a sense that the emotions are frozen. It is also problematic when it becomes impossible to hope that the situation will get better. Everyone feels depression in a slightly different way.
- **Does it get better?** The advice to “just cheer up” doesn’t work for depression. However, certain things can help you manage depression and feel better overall. (See strategies in the section [What can I do to manage cancer-related depression?](#)).



## What causes depression?

If you are already experiencing depression, a cancer diagnosis can make it worse. Common causes of cancer-related depression include:

- The shock of diagnosis or of learning that your cancer is difficult to treat
- Changes in your body due to cancer, like loss of a breast or hair loss
- Distress
- Pain or tiredness
- Grieving the loss of your previous health status
- Feelings of isolation



## What are the signs of depression?

You may have depression if you have all or some of these symptoms for two weeks or longer:

- You feel sad, tearful, empty, hopeless, anxious and/or irritable
- You have a hard time completing your daily activities
- You no longer take pleasure in activities you used to enjoy, and nothing seems to cheer you up

- You have low energy and trouble concentrating or making decisions
- You stop looking after your health
- You eat more or less than usual
- You sleep more or less than usual
- You focus on bad outcomes of your cancer
- You think about harming yourself



### When should I get help for my depression?

If the low mood doesn't go away after 2 weeks, worsens, or makes it hard for you to complete your daily tasks, it is time to ask a professional for help. In this case, you should speak with your oncologist, nurse, or pivot nurse immediately. Support from other people is part of the healing process. These support people might include your family, friends, or health professionals. For more information on how to address your concerns with your oncologist, radiation oncologist, or another member of your healthcare team, see [Talking to your healthcare professional about your symptoms or concerns](#).



#### **Talk to someone in your healthcare team immediately if:**

- You feel like you are in a state of crisis.
- You think about harming yourself or others.
- You have suicidal thoughts or plans.

## What can I do to manage cancer-related depression?

A healthcare professional can help you identify the depression. After speaking with them, you can try some of the strategies suggested here.



### Keep a symptom diary

Writing down your negative thoughts and feelings in a diary has many advantages. It can:

- Help you work through your feelings and figure out exactly what is bothering you.
- Help you identify thoughts or behaviours that trigger your depression. This may allow you to make changes in your routine.
- Give you a better idea of how your emotional life is changing over time.
- You can choose to share your journal with a therapist. If you do, it can help them to better understand your symptoms. This will help them decide on the best treatments for you. You do not have to share your journal with anyone if you do not want to.
- For more information see [Symptom Diary](#).



## Take care of yourself

When you are depressed, you might feel it's pointless to take care of yourself. But self-care can help improve your depression. Focus on these basics:

- Eat well. A balanced diet can help lift your spirits. Eat regularly and limit junk food (sugary, salty, fatty, and processed foods).
- Drink plenty of fluids. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- If your cancer symptoms (for example, nausea or mouth sores) get in the way of healthy eating, ask your healthcare team for help.
- Move your body. Even small amounts of exercise release endorphins, which boost your mood and decrease pain. Choose an activity you like. Start slow, and build from there. It is generally fine to exercise during treatment, but check with your healthcare team before starting any exercise.
- Sleep better. Improving your sleep will also improve your mood. Deal with your worries earlier in the evening and wind down with relaxing activities before bedtime. Avoid screens (tv, computer, cell phone) from two hours before your bedtime.
- For more information see [Looking After Yourself](#).



### **Build simple, enjoyable activities into your day**

Make a list of activities you enjoy, and try them out on different days. Push yourself to do the activities even if you don't want to. Doing nothing tends to make depression worse. Some suggestions to get you started:

- Cook a favourite dish or try a new one.
- Look around a market or museum.
- Walk through your neighbourhood and take pictures.
- Visit a local park, swimming pool, or library.
- Have a relaxing bath.
- Play with your pets, if you have any.
- Do a “mind activity” you find satisfying. You can try a crossword puzzle or solitaire card game.
- Listen to music or read a book, magazine, or newspaper.



### **Identify the problem**

You are dealing with a lot of challenges with a cancer diagnosis. Using a problem-solving approach to develop strategies to deal with them can help you manage your worries.

- You can start by trying to figure out what exactly is the problem you want to solve. To do this try to break down a big problem into many smaller problems that are easier to solve.
- Consider all possible options to solve the problem.
- Plan to put the best option in use. Look at the outcome from this action to then improve the solution further.
- For more information, see [Problem Solving](#).



### Reconsider your thinking

Don't force yourself to be positive all the time, because it is not possible. Instead, aim to replace negative thoughts with more realistic and optimistic ones. For example, you could reframe "I'm not coping well at all" to "I'm managing a few small things quite well." When you catch yourself in a hopeless thought, ask yourself: Is it true? Is it helpful? (It often isn't.)

- For more information see the first suggestion in [Problem Solving](#).



### Connect with people

Connecting with other people can distract you from negative thoughts and improve your outlook. Here's how to make it happen:

- Schedule a time to reach out to a friend or family member. If it's in your calendar, you're more likely to do it.
- Invite someone to join you for an activity. This could be a walk, movie, or cup of coffee.
- Join a class at your community centre or a hobby group. Whether it is an activity you have enjoyed in the past or something brand new, sharing it with others can inspire and energize you.



## Get support

Psychotherapy or counselling can help you manage depression. If you're not sure where to start, a member of your healthcare team can point you in the right direction. Here are some approaches to consider, depending on your preferences and needs:

- Mindfulness-based stress reduction which teaches you to manage stress from chronic conditions.
- Cognitive-behavioural therapy focuses on changing negative thinking and behaviour patterns.
- Therapies that encourage creative expression. For example, art therapy.
- Support groups. These can be face-to-face or online.
- Oncology social workers. They not only provide counselling and emotional support, but can also refer you to support groups and community programs.
- For more information see [Getting support](#).



## Discuss potential medications with your health care team

There are many types of antidepressants on the market. It is important to discuss these with your doctor or pharmacist. Keep in mind that it may take about 4-8 weeks for you to notice an improvement from antidepressants. If one medication doesn't work or causes bothersome side effects, you may need another one or a different dose. If this is the case, you should speak to your healthcare team. Medication combined with therapy or counselling usually offers the best results.

## Information about cannabis

Some patients do use cannabis to reduce pain, help with relaxation or as a sleeping aid. However, the research is still unclear about the use of cannabis to manage cancer-related symptoms, including depression. It is important to talk to your doctor before trying cannabis. For more information on what cancer patients should know about cannabis, go to: <https://www.bccancer.ca/health-info/coping-with-cancer/medical-cannabis>.



## Resources

For more information on depression, self-management strategies and support organizations, check out the resources below.

[BC Cancer – Symptoms of depression](#)

[Canadian Association of Psychological Oncology – The emotional facts of life with cancer](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Coping when you have cancer](#)

[Cancer Care Ontario – How to manage your depression](#)

[Rossy cancer network – Looking forward: Emotions, fears and relationships](#)

[Info-aidant – Support for Caregivers \(info-aidant@lappui.org or call 1 855 852-7784\)](#)

## Acknowledgement of sources

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

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- Cyr C et al. Cannabis in palliative care: current challenges and practical recommendations. *Ann Palliat Med* 2018;7:463-477.
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- TEMPO. Feeling sad, lonely or depressed.

### **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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