

# Frustration/Anger



"I learned that emotions are my friends, not my enemies, to see them as a signal system that's there for a reason. I used my anger to fight back against the cancer!"

**Debbie**  
**diagnosed with breast cancer**

## **How does this affect me?**

It is not unusual to feel frustrated or angry when faced with a cancer diagnosis. You can go through many emotions with strong feelings that come and go. You might be angry at the cancer itself, the healthcare professionals who found the cancer, friends and family who are healthy and don't understand what you're going through, or even your body. Often, people will express anger instead of other emotions they might be feeling. You might be scared or feel alone and these emotions are coming out as anger right now. Anger can always find a target—cancer may be identified as the enemy, but the anger is more often directed at others with whom grievances are rarely expressed. Anger is a natural and universal experience like love, fatigue, sadness or hunger.

You might have been raised to think that it is unacceptable to express anger. However, ignoring that feeling won't make it go away. In fact, it could come out in unhealthy ways, hurting you and those around you. Not acknowledging your frustration and anger can make coping with the cancer harder. Don't pretend that everything is fine when it is not. You can warn friends that you may seem moody but it's not because of them.



## What can I do to feel less angry and frustrated?

Pay attention to it and learn to recognize the physical signs that accompany these feelings. Your breathing might be faster and it feels like your heart is racing. Sometimes these feelings can make you act out and not think logically. This is a common experience and the psychological stress associated with the diagnosis of cancer can be caused by “NUTS”:

- the **N**ovelty of the situation you are thrust into,
- the **U**npredictability of the success of treatment,
- the **T**hreat to your ego posed by the changes brought about by the illness and
- the loss of your **S**ense of control over the situation

### Don't let your anger build up

Try to find a way to express your anger in a healthy way. You could use one of these strategies:

- Cry
- Pound a pillow
- Listen to calming music
- Move your body: match the vigor of your activity to the force of your feelings
- Try a calming activity like yoga or breathing exercises or a favoured method of prayer
- Journal writing: sometimes getting your feelings down on paper can be a safe way to express them
- At your next hospital visit, ask to speak with a member of the Psychosocial team who are specially trained to offer support and accompaniment

### **Do something different**

When you are feeling a strong emotion, sometimes a change in setting can help cut the force of your feelings. Taking some distance from the situation can help to put things in perspective and may allow you to see things from a different angle. Try a brisk walk or a change in activity.

### **Anticipate your emotions**

If you know ahead of time that something might trigger emotions, like a doctor's appointment or test results, try to build in some quiet time both before and after. This will allow you to plan for the stressful event and to question your thinking about the event to make sure you're not being overly dramatic. For example, your initial reaction to feedback you don't like from a friend might be "What do you know about it? I don't want your advice." Now question those thoughts and recognize that you are upset and your feelings are hurt—then try to express your feelings in a more productive way.

### **Problem Solve**

The frustration you are feeling might stem from feeling that your needs are not being met. Or maybe you feel a loss of control because you are not sure how to solve a problem. You can start by breaking down the one big problem into two or three smaller problems that might be easier to deal with. For more information see [Problem solving](#).

### **Inform yourself**

Anger and frustration can be based in fear. You can address this fear by asking your healthcare professionals for information and telling them your concerns. You will be better able to understand the situation, the next steps, and be able to participate in your treatment decisions.



## What help do I need?

### **Share your feelings**

Talk to someone about what you are feeling. This could be a close friend or family member or it might be easier to talk to someone outside your immediate circle. Your doctor could refer you to a counsellor.

### **Make plans**

Try to include small pleasures in your day as “life reminders”. Plan an activity or project with your family or friends. This is something where you can have a sense of control. In this way, you can offset some of the stressful emotions that go with cancer.

## **Connect with others and get support**

Just about all people experience greater wellbeing when they feel connected to, and supported by, other people. Depending on your personality and needs, some of these tips may work for you:

- Enlist your family and friends for both companionship and support; remember that most people are eager to help, especially if you let them know what you need.
- Join a support group for people who are going through similar experiences. Such groups give you a chance to share experiences in a safe environment and find out what works for other people. Ask your healthcare team for referrals to support groups. There may be online support groups or groups over the telephone.
- If you are a religious person, the support of your faith community, whether in person or through prayer, can also provide a sense of community and spiritual strength and comfort.
- Join an online forum, such as [CancerConnection.ca](https://www.cancerconnection.ca), where you can participate in discussions and learn from other people's comments. Good websites to start a search for information are often public, non-profit websites.
- Get professional support from a therapist, who can help you adjust to the impact of cancer.

For more information see [Getting Support](#).



## Where can I find help?

### **Healthcare team**

There may be a psychosocial professional on your team. If not, you can ask your doctor for a referral. Psychosocial-oncologists can help you understand, navigate and adjust to the social, psychological, emotional and spiritual aspects of cancer care. They can also provide or help you find support services you and your family may need, as well as support groups for patients or caregivers.

### **Canadian Cancer Society**

The [CancerConnection.ca](https://www.cancerconnection.ca) online community provides a forum to connect with other people with cancer and loved ones to share their experiences.

### **Quebec Cancer Foundation**

The Foundation provides a [resource directory](#) where you can search for the organizations near you offering a variety of services including spiritual care, home help, lodging, transportation, and other supportive resources.

### **••• Other cancer survivors and their families**

Everyone's life is different, but it might help to share thoughts, concerns and ideas with someone who has lived through a similar situation. A family member or colleague may know someone who has had cancer who can share their experience.



## What can I do to look after myself?



### Practice relaxation strategies

Taking care of yourself by finding ways to relax can help your mind and body. This can lead to better sleep and reduced stress. These easy relaxation strategies can be done anywhere!

- **Breathing exercises.** 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.
- For more information see [Relaxation strategies](#).

## Resources

For more information on frustration/anger, check out the resources below.

- [Canadian Cancer Society – Your emotions and cancer](#)
- [BC Cancer – Expressing Anger](#)
- [Canadian Cancer Society – Cancer Connection](#)

## **Acknowledgement of sources**

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

- BC Cancer. Anger. 2020.
- BC Cancer. Expressing Anger. 2020.
- Canadian Cancer Society. Coping when you have cancer. 2017.
- Canadian Cancer Society. Your emotions and cancer. 2020.
- Coping together. Dealing with stress and worry. 2013.
- Fondation Québécoise du cancer. The emotional challenge of a cancer diagnosis. 2020.

## **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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**Last updated:** August 5, 2021