

# How Family Caregivers can Maintain Their Mental Health during COVID-19

## Information for people who support family members with cancer

Read this brochure to learn about:

[How to manage difficult emotions](#) page 3

[How to maintain your mental health](#) page 6

[Mental health supports and crisis planning](#) page 9

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Caring for a family member or friend who has cancer is not easy. You may find yourself having to take on many new, important duties. It can be very rewarding to care for someone, but it can also leave you feeling overwhelmed and stressed.

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting everyone – our families, our personal lives, our work lives, our communities and our world. It is hard to feel calm right now. It can be more challenging when caring for someone with cancer.

This brochure provides you with some ways to help lower your anxiety and help you find some sense of calm.

## **Changes in cancer care and visitor policy**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused changes to health care in Ontario. Visit the UHN website for updated information on the [UHN Visitor Policy](https://www.uhn.ca/Covid19/Pages/COVID_updates_for_visitors.aspx) ([https://www.uhn.ca/Covid19/Pages/COVID\\_updates\\_for\\_visitors.aspx](https://www.uhn.ca/Covid19/Pages/COVID_updates_for_visitors.aspx))

## **Princess Margaret Information Line**

You can also call the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre Patient Information Line (Info Line) to speak with an Information Specialist for questions about:

- patient transportation and mobility concerns
- outpatient pharmacy pick up
- caregiver and family visitor guidelines
- screening processes for patients
- reduced parking lot rates
- clinic hours and operations

Phone: 416 946 4559

Hours: Monday to Friday, 8:00 am to 4:00 pm

# How to manage difficult emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic

You may feel as stressed or more stressed than the person you are caring for. Here are some things you can do to address difficult emotions.

Most of these tips and others are in [How to Maintain Your Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/How_to_Maintain_Your_Mental_Health_During_the_COVID-19_Pandemic.pdf)

([https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health\\_Information/Health\\_Topics/Documents/How\\_to\\_Maintain\\_Your\\_Mental\\_Health\\_During\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_Pandemic.pdf](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/How_to_Maintain_Your_Mental_Health_During_the_COVID-19_Pandemic.pdf))

## Get the facts

Gather reliable information so you know your risk for infection and can take reasonable steps to protect yourself.

For up-to-date information:

- visit the [Ontario COVID-19 webpage](https://covid-19.ontario.ca/) (<https://covid-19.ontario.ca/>)
- call Telehealth Ontario at 1 866 797 000
- call Toronto Public Health Helpline at 416 338 7600 or 311 after hours

## Make a plan

Plan what you will do if you or the person you are caring for get sick or need to self-quarantine (isolate yourself). Having a plan may help relieve some stress.

- Ask family or friends you trust if they can help you if you need them to.
- Write a list of the types of care you provide.
- Keep a list of all health care providers, any medical records and medicines together in one place. You may want to use the [Healthcare Journey Binder](https://changeofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/healthcare-journey-binder-nov-2019.pdf) (<https://changeofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/healthcare-journey-binder-nov-2019.pdf>)

## **Limit how much news you watch**

Too much pandemic-related news can increase your anxiety. Try setting a limit on the amount of time you spend watching or listening to the news every day.

## **Learn ways to deal with uncertainty**

Uncertainty is feeling unsure about what may happen next. Caregivers may already deal with the stress of uncertainty. It is normal to feel anxious when there is a lot of uncertainty and plans may change quickly due to the pandemic.

To help deal with uncertainty, learn to identify what you can control.

### **For things you CAN control:**

- use problem solving
  1. identify the problem
  2. think of as many solutions as possible
  3. assess which solution is the best
  4. try that solution
  5. if it does not work, return to your list of solutions and try another one
- ask for help. Remember that there are many people around you willing to help

### **For things you CANNOT control:**

- accept what is not in your control. No person can predict or control everything that happens in life

Find more tools in [Tolerance for Uncertainty: a COVID-19 Workbook](https://76d67a00-6a01-4ad7-a676-1e8960d7c8aa.filesusr.com/ugd/b8a493_215941041f724ff88271326bfa5de251.pdf)  
([https://76d67a00-6a01-4ad7-a676-1e8960d7c8aa.filesusr.com/ugd/b8a493\\_215941041f724ff88271326bfa5de251.pdf](https://76d67a00-6a01-4ad7-a676-1e8960d7c8aa.filesusr.com/ugd/b8a493_215941041f724ff88271326bfa5de251.pdf))

## **Challenge unhelpful thoughts**

Recognize unhelpful thoughts and try to think about them in a different way. For example, a common unhelpful thought caregivers may have is that it is 'selfish' to take time to care for themselves.

One way to challenge unhelpful thoughts is to think about what you would tell a close friend if they were in your situation and came to you for advice. It can be easier to understand the limits and needs of people you love than your own limits and needs.

## **Understand your anger**

Emotions like anger, resentment and frustration are often caused by fear, helplessness or sadness. The need to belong, feel safe and be cared for is often behind these emotions. Knowing about these layers of emotions can help you cope and not take things personally.

- Talk to a trusted family member, friend or health care provider to express your feelings.
- Try to express anger through artistic or physical activity.
- It is helpful to create a list of triggers that cause the anger. Changes to your lifestyle, relationships or daily routine can lessen triggers.

## **Coping with loss**

COVID-19 has led to many losses in our lives including loss of our normal routines and feelings of safety. Caregivers may not be able to attend appointments with patients, visit patients in the hospital, or depend on their usual ways of coping if they have to self-isolate. You may feel a sense of grief over these losses and others.

Know that grief is normal. During this time you may find it helpful to talk with or message family and friends, accept what is happening and be kind toward yourself and others.

You may also feel anticipatory grief. Anticipatory grief is the grief people feel when waiting for an expected loss. For example, we may start grieving for someone who is very sick while they are still alive.

For information about how to cope with grief and anticipatory grief, visit: [My Grief](http://www.mygrief.ca) (<http://www.mygrief.ca>).

## Maintain your mental health

Caregivers face many pressures. You might neglect yourself and your needs sometimes while caring for someone else. It is important to maintain your mental health. It is more challenging to help others when you are not taking care of yourself.

There are many ways to lower anxiety and maintain your mental health. Try some of the suggestions below to see what works for you.

Most of these strategies are also in the patient brochure. You may find it helpful to use these strategies together with the person you are caring for.

### Practice relaxation methods

These methods can help you feel more relaxed. Practice using them when you are not too stressed so they are easier to use when you feel anxious.

- **Deep breathing.** Breathe in through your nose and notice your belly expand, then pause. Slowly breathe out through your mouth and notice that your belly moves back. Repeat slowly for 2 minutes.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** This method reduces physical tension in your body by slowly tensing and then relaxing the muscles in your body. Start with your toes and move slowly up your body. Find a video on YouTube that takes you through this exercise.

- **Mindfulness meditation.** This method helps calm your mind and body. Try doing a “body scan”. Sit or lie in a quiet place, close your eyes and bring awareness to each body part. Start with your feet, ankles, lower legs, and move all the way up to your head.  
Try using a meditation app on your phone or find a video on YouTube.

## **Maintain structure in your day**

Many of our daily routines have changed due to COVID-19. Here are some ways to maintain or create structure.

- **Make a schedule or routine.** Try to wake up at the same time each day, get dressed, have set meal times and take breaks if you are working from home.
- **Do some tasks or chores every day.** Do simple tasks every day to help you feel like you have accomplished something. Simple tasks include making your bed, doing laundry or preparing a meal. Try to choose tasks that do not let your mind focus on worry.
- **Make time to unwind.** Try to do 3 things each day that bring you pleasure. Listen to your favourite song, draw or colour, go for a walk, watch a comedy or read a book.

## **Use technology to maintain relationships with family and friends**

Talk with or message family and friends to share feelings, lessen stress and make life feel a little more normal. Arrange a daily or weekly phone or video call to stay connected with family and friends when you cannot see them in person.

## **Practice feeling grateful**

Spend time each day thinking about or writing down 3 things you are grateful for. For example, you may be grateful for having a place to self-isolate or for the people in your life.

## **Exercise**

Exercise and fitness can help you maintain your physical health, a positive mood, good sleep and manage anxiety. Do exercise that is in line with your ability and comfort level.

When possible, go for a daily walk, do indoor activities such as yoga or try low impact exercises such as chair exercises. Here are some links to websites to help you maintain your physical health.

- [Cancer Recovery Exercise Program - Treloar Physiotherapy](https://bit.ly/treloarphysio) (https://bit.ly/treloarphysio)
- [Staying active while isolated](https://bit.ly/stayingactivecovid) (https://bit.ly/stayingactivecovid)
- [Move More exercise series](https://bit.ly/MacmillanExercise) (https://bit.ly/MacmillanExercise)

## **Get enough sleep**

Maintain a regular sleep routine and practice good sleep habits. Here are some tips for getting enough sleep.

- Use your bed only for sleep and sex, not for work.
- Limit caffeine and alcohol in the evening.
- Reduce screen time and blue light in the evening.
- Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.
- Do not put pressure on yourself if you did not have a good night's sleep.

## **Eat healthy food**

Limit caffeine, sugar and other foods that can increase anxiety or anger when eaten in large amounts.

## **Reduce substance use**

Reduce your use of alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other drugs that can cause or increase anxiety.

## Practice self-compassion

It can be hard and takes time to learn how to manage worries. Be kind to yourself if you forget to practice some of these methods or do not feel better right away.

## More tools to help maintain your mental health

Learn about more tools to help maintain your mental health by watching [Mental Health and Well-Being for Caregivers](#)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4R4N6r2ot24>) from Family Caregivers of BC.

## Mental health supports and crisis planning

Depression and anxiety may worsen during these hard times. There are phone and online mental health supports available to help family caregivers cope.

- Ask to be referred to the **Princess Margaret Caregiver Clinic** if distress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row. Call and ask any member of your loved one's Princess Margaret health care team for a referral. You will have a virtual appointment with a Caregiver Clinic team member.

Visit the [Princess Margaret Caregiver Clinic website](#)

([https://www.uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret/Clinics/Caring\\_for\\_the\\_Caregiver](https://www.uhn.ca/PrincessMargaret/Clinics/Caring_for_the_Caregiver))

- Join a virtual caregiver support group.
  - Contact the [Ontario Caregiver Organization Helpline](#) (<https://ontariocaregiver.ca/find-support/helpline/>) to speak with a Resource Specialist or to join their virtual caregiver support group
  - [Wellspring](#) (<https://wellspring.ca/online-programs/programs/all-programs/>)
  - [Gilda's Club Greater Toronto](#) (<https://gildasclubtoronto.org>)

- Contact **ConnexOntario** for help finding mental health and addictions supports in Ontario. The service is free and confidential. It is available whenever you need support.  
Phone: 1 866 531 2600 (toll-free)  
[ConnexOntario website](https://www.connexontario.ca) (https://www.connexontario.ca)
- You can find more resources in the [Family Caregiving in Canada: COVID-19 & Beyond Digital Resource Package](http://www.caregiversalberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Family-Caregiving-in-Canada_-COVID-19-Beyond-Resource-Package.pdf) (http://www.caregiversalberta.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Family-Caregiving-in-Canada\_-COVID-19-Beyond-Resource-Package.pdf)

### **Online programs to build your resilience (for caregivers and non-caregivers)**

There are online programs you can take to build your resilience (ability to adapt well to hardship). Learn skills to help you manage your thoughts and feelings.

- **AbilitiCBT** (https://ontario.abiliticbt.com) uses internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) to help you manage your mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. A professional therapist monitors your progress and checks in with you by phone or video throughout the program.
- **MindBeacon** (https://bit.ly/BeaconOntario) uses internet-based cognitive behavioural therapy to help you learn how to manage your thoughts and feelings. You can also get support from a therapist through 1-on-1 conversations for up to 12 weeks.
- **BounceBack** (https://bouncebackontario.ca) helps people 15 years and older build skills to manage low mood, anxiety and stress. The program includes coaching over the phone, skill building workbooks and videos.
- **Starling Minds** (https://bit.ly/starlingminds) is a confidential (private) and free mental health program that has tools to help you cope with stress, anxiety and worry during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Help During a Crisis

Most crisis lines and websites are still open. Call the numbers below for support at any time:

- **Toronto Distress Centre**  
Phone: 416 408 4357  
[Toronto Distress Centre online chat](https://www.torontodistresscentre.com)  
(<https://www.torontodistresscentre.com>)
- **The Warm Line (Mental Health Helpline)**  
Phone: 416 960 9276  
Text: 647 557 5882  
[The Warm Line online chat](http://www.warmline.ca) (<http://www.warmline.ca>)
- **Assaulted Women's Helpline**  
Phone: (Toll free number) 1 866 863 0511 or 416 863 0511

If you are having thoughts of suicide (killing yourself), the emergency department is still open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to help you in your time of crisis. Go to your nearest emergency department or call 911 if you feel you are at risk of harming yourself.