How to Maintain Your Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Information for people with cancer and their families

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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.

Many people are afraid of becoming infected with COVID-19. If your immune system is weakened from your cancer or cancer treatment, you may be even more afraid of becoming infected. It is okay to feel anxious or scared or angry. There is no right way to feel during this difficult time.

This brochure provides you with some ways to help lower your anxiety and help you find some sense of calm. There are also resources available on the internet as well.

**Changes in Cancer Care**

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused changes to health care in Ontario. Read the UHN brochure [Changes in Cancer Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/Changes_in_Cancer_Care_During_COVID-19.pdf) to learn how these changes might affect your cancer care.

**Princess Margaret Information Line**

The Princess Margaret Cancer Centre now has a Patient Information Line to answer your questions and direct you to places to get support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Call the Info Line at 416 946 4559 between 8:00 am to 4:00 pm, Monday to Friday, to speak with an Information Specialist.

**UHN Online Screening Tool**

Everyone entering UHN is being screened for COVID-19. This is to keep our patients, visitors and staff safe.
Patients can speak with the entrance screener OR use the UHN online screening tool (https://uhnpatientscreen.ca).

No personal information is collected or stored through the screening tool.

Follow 3 easy steps to use the online screening tool:

1. Open your browser on your mobile device and go to the UHN online screening tool (https://uhnpatientscreen.ca) within 2 hours of your appointment.

2. Click “Begin” and answer the questions honestly.

3. Show the final page to the entrance screener.
How to manage difficult emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic

During a crisis it is normal to feel:

- sad
- stressed
- confused
- scared
- angry
- anxious

Here are some things you can do to address these difficult emotions.

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 [UHN COVID-19 webpage](http://www.uhn.ca/covid19)
- visit the [City of Toronto COVID-19 webpage](http://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19)
- visit the [Ontario COVID-19 webpage](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

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. People living with cancer 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 like physical distancing and regular hand washing.

For things you can control:

- use problem solving
  - identify the problem
  - think of as many solutions as possible
  - assess which solution is the best
  - try that solution
  - 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 know or predict everything that happens in life

- distract yourself. Take a brief mental break:
  - listen to a favorite song
  - meditate
Challenge negative thoughts

Recognize negative thoughts and challenge them by thinking about them in a different way. One approach is to think about what you would tell a friend or co-worker who is thinking the same things.

Understand your anger

Anger is often driven by fear, anxiety or sadness. But what is often behind these emotions is the need to belong, feel safe and cared for. Knowing about these layers of emotions can help you not to take things personally and allows you to see through the anger.

- 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 grief

COVID-19 has led to many losses in our lives including loss of our normal routines and feelings of safety. You may feel a sense of grief over these losses.

Here are some ways to cope with grief.

- Know that grief is normal.
- Stay in touch with friends and family.
- Accept what is happening.
- Be kind toward yourself and others.
Maintain your mental health

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

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 stay socially connected**

Maintain your social networks to share feelings, lessen stress and make life feel a little more normal. During times of physical distancing, try to connect with family and friends virtually, by having a daily or weekly get together.

**Check on and help others**

Give your time and energy to help others through peer support, checking on neighbours and helping with child or elder care (where safe to do so). When you assist others, it not only helps them but also makes you feel good.

**Practice gratitude**

Spend time each day thinking about 3 things you are grateful for. For example, you may be grateful for having a place to self-isolate, for the people in your life or for the health care providers that are working hard to assist you.

**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.
Exercise

Exercise and fitness can help you maintain your physical health, a positive mood, good sleep habits 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.

- Staying active while isolated (https://bit.ly/stayingactivecovid)

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.
Financial resources to help you through the pandemic

Money can be a major source of stress and anxiety for many people right now. All levels of government have financial supports (money) for people affected by COVID-19. Who can get support and how to get it are changing often. Check reliable websites and sources for updates.


If you would like to speak to someone about applying to these programs you can:

- call Princess Margaret Psychosocial Oncology at 416 946 4525 and ask to speak to a social worker
- email the Money Matters program (moneymatters@wellspring.ca) at Wellspring
- email West Neighbourhood House (FEPS@westnh.org) or call 416 532 4828

To access help with food banks, hydro (electricity), banking, rent, child care and mortgage information, visit:

- 211 Ontario (https://covid19.211central.ca)
- City of Toronto (https://www.toronto.ca/home/covid-19/)
- or call your local municipality (the local government in your city, town, village or area you live in)
Resources for children, teens and parents

Adults are not the only ones whose lives have changed in drastic ways. Children and teens have also had drastic changes in their lives due to:

- being out of school
- missing normal routines
- missing social activities
- not seeing friends
- missing out on extra activities such as music and sports

These changes and losses can have a large impact on your child or teen. Children may also be hearing or reading information that frightens them or is not truthful. Here are some ways to help reduce your children’s fears or anxieties.

- Speak to your child in an open way about COVID-19.
- Give your child information that is honest and based on facts.

Below is a list of resources for children, teens, parents and caregivers during this pandemic.

**About Kids Health** ([http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/COVID-19](http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/COVID-19)).
A resource from The Hospital for Sick Children to help families cope with COVID-19.

- **Kids Help Phone** ([https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/were-here-for-you-during-covid-19-novel-coronavirus](https://kidshelpphone.ca/get-info/were-here-for-you-during-covid-19-novel-coronavirus)).

  Tips from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.
- **Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)**
  Provided by The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.
Mental health supports and crisis planning

Your depression and anxiety may worsen during these hard times. There are phone and online mental health supports available to help you cope with anxiety, depression, isolation and stress.

- Call Princess Margaret Cancer Centre Psychosocial Oncology if distress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row.
  Phone: 416 946 4525

- 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)

Online programs to build your resilience

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)

- **The Warm Line (Mental Health Helpline)**  
  Phone: 416 960 9276  
  Text: 647 557 5882  
  [The Warm Line online chat](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.