

Coping with COVID-19 Stress and Anxiety, Information for Cancer Patients

It is understandable to feel anxious, fearful and concerned as we deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a stressful and uncertain time for all of us and holds many challenges. People affected by cancer may have more worry due to concerns about the risk of getting COVID-19, how the pandemic might affect their treatment and follow-up care, and worry about their loved ones. Cancer patients and caregivers may also feel more isolated.

The information in this resource may help you manage your worry, stress and anxiety.

The Canadian Psychological Association has published a helpful “Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Psychological Impacts of the Coronavirus (COVID-19), and we have adapted some sections, with permission here¹. To read the full Fact Sheet visit <https://cpa.ca/psychology-works-fact-sheet-psychological-impacts-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19/>

Some General Things to Keep in Mind about Stress

- People are strong and resilient, and generally have the skills they need to cope with the stressors they experience.
- Not everyone reacts to the same stressful event in the same way and not everyone shows their distress in the same way.
- The ways in which children and communities cope and react to a stressor are influenced by how they see parents, caregivers and community leaders cope and react.

¹ Canadian Psychological Association Psychology Works Fact Sheet: Psychological Impacts of COVID-19, March 2020. Adapted with permission from the Canadian Psychological Association.

Things that Can Help

If you are having difficulty coping with worry and anxiety about the coronavirus while also coping with cancer, here are some things you can do to help:

- Stay informed by listening to trusted sources of news such as:
 - Nova Scotia Government <https://beta.novascotia.ca/>
 - Nova Scotia Health Authority <http://www.nshealth.ca/cancer-care>
 - Health Canada <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html>
 - World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/>
- Limit your time watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media. Hearing too much about the pandemic can be upsetting.
- Take care of yourself:
 - Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals
 - Be physically active
 - Get plenty of sleep
 - Avoid alcohol and drugs
- Work on self-management strategies that can help with worry and anxiety such as:
 - Relaxation and meditation:
 - **BC Cancer** <https://soundcloud.com/phsabc>
 - **Anxiety Canada** - Anxietycanada.com
 - Try to do activities you enjoy
 - Be kind to yourself
- Maintain a daily routine, as normal for you as possible.
- Connect with others by phone or virtually. Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling.

- Do your best to maintain a sense of hope and keep things in perspective.

Call your Health Care Provider or your Cancer Care Team if stress gets in the way of your daily activities for several days in a row.

When Distress Becomes Too Much

Stressors such as the risk of COVID-19 will affect people differently. We can be affected psychologically, for example feeling worried, and physically, for example sleeping poorly. Stressors that are beyond our personal control can be especially difficult to cope with well. Some signs and symptoms that people may have when feeling overwhelmed include:

- Sleeping poorly, too much or too little
- Avoiding others, even within the confines of social/physical distancing
- Having physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach problems
- Crying, tearfulness
- Talking less
- Feeling anxious, depressed or having panic attacks
- Feeling angry, guilty, helpless, numb, or confused
- Thinking about or watching too much TV about COVID-19
- Worrying that interferes with everyday tasks
- Not wanting to get out of bed
- Difficulties concentrating
- Change in appetite, eating too much or too little

- Drinking more alcohol or taking more prescription drugs
- Having little patience
- Feeling overprotective of loved ones

It is important to remember that most of us have had some of the signs and symptoms listed above at one time or another and that COVID-19 has led to increased stress for most people.

If you have a number of these signs and symptoms that:

- last beyond a couple of weeks
- last to the point where you are not able to do your home or work-related activities allowed by social/physical distancing advisories

Contact your Cancer Care Team or your Health Care Provider for assistance, support, and referral if needed within the health care system, or privately if you have extended medical insurance.

If you are experiencing intense feelings of despair, helplessness, thoughts of self-harm or suicide, call the Mental Health Crisis Line 1-888-429-8167, available 24 hours/day, 7 days a week, call 911, or go to your closest emergency department.

Helpful Resources and Websites

NSHA Cancer Care Program has a number of sessions online that can help you cope with how you are feeling. <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4902954>

If you are having a lot of difficulty coping with worry and anxiety about COVID-19 because you have cancer, please call your Cancer Care Team or the NSHA Cancer Care Program toll free line for information and support:

- Halifax Regional Municipality: 902-240-8129
- Cape Breton: 902-567-8551 or 902-567-1702
- Antigonish/Guysborough/Richmond and South Eastern Inverness: 902-863-2830 Ext 4707
- Yarmouth/Shelburne/Digby: 902-749-1523
- Lunenburg and Queens County: 902-527-5820 or email Chantal.boudreau@nshealth.ca
- Kings/Annapolis County: 902-690-3700
- For all other parts of the province - toll-free: 1-866-599-2267

The Canadian Cancer Society has programs that can help you manage feelings of anxiety and isolation.

- **Cancer Information Service** is the national, toll-free helpline for people with cancer, caregivers, families and friends, the general public and healthcare professionals. www.cancer.ca or call them at 1-888-939-3333 (TTY 1-886-786-3934).
- www.CancerConnection.ca is the online community where people with cancer and their loved ones can share their experiences and build supportive relationships.
- **Peer Match** is the phone-based support system that connects people living with cancer and their caregivers with trained volunteers who offer encouragement and share ideas for coping from the unique perspective of their own cancer journeys. <https://match.cancer.ca/about-the-program>

- **COVID – 19 specific information** <https://www.cancer.ca/en/support-and-services/support-services/cancer-and-covid19/?region=on>

Mindwell U – Is available through the **NSHA Mental Health and Addictions Program**. It is a free online program that takes five minutes a day during which you learn mindfulness skills that can help lower stress and increase resilience. To access this program, visit <https://app.mindwellu.com/novascotia>

TAO – Therapy Assistance Online - A free and private online resource available to Nova Scotians and offered through the **NSHA Mental Health and Addictions Program**. TAO includes interactive activities and videos for people having challenges with their mental health or substance use. Register here <https://www.nshealth.ca/content/online-mental-health-services>

I Can, Conquer Anxiety and Nervousness – This is a self-referral program via internet and phone to help manage anxiety. To register go to <https://login.strongestfamilies.com/folder/1963>. Offered through the **NSHA Mental Health and Addictions Program**.

NSHA, Mental Health and Addiction Intake Service - NSHA’s Mental Health Program can help if you have a mental health or addiction concern. The Intake Service provides access to Community Mental Health and Addiction clinics, Withdrawal Management Services, or Opioid Replacement and Treatment Programs and guidance to additional services if necessary. You can self-refer by calling 1-855-922-1122, weekdays 8:30 am to 4:30 pm. *This line has voicemail only evenings, weekends and statutory holidays.*

BC Cancer <https://soundcloud.com/phsabc>

Anxiety Canada - [Anxietycanada.com](https://www.anxietycanada.com) – Information for adults, youth and children on coping with anxiety and more specifically on COVID-19. There is also a free phone app available at <https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>

Wellness Together Canada -

Nationally available mental health and addictions tools and resources. There are a variety of resource available on this site. Users can answer a few questions and be directed to appropriate services and supports. For more information go to

<https://ca.portal.gs/?lang=en-ca>

Cancer Chat Canada – Free, professional led online support groups. For more information go to <https://cancerchat.desouzainstitute.com>

Young Adult Cancer Canada – www.youngadultcancer.ca

David Maginley, Spiritual Care Provider, on Cancer and COVID -19 –

<https://youtu.be/B8mL0qAwbbU>

Kids Help Phone – 1 (800) 668-6868 (Toll Free) or go to the website at

kidshelpphone.ca

Coping with Stress and Anxiety: Strategies to maintain your mental wellness during COVID-19. – Tip Sheet www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-health-and-covid-19#coping

If you have access to an **Employee Assistance Program** through your place of employment, you may wish to explore what help they may be able to provide.

Helpful Canadian Government Resources

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/news/2020/03/introduces-canada-emergency-response-benefit-to-help-workers-and-businesses.html>

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-finance/economic-response-plan.html>

<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/diseases-conditions/taking-care-mental-health.html>

<https://cme-mec.ca/coronavirus-covid-19-resources/>

Document developed by the COVID-19 Psychosocial Oncology Working Group:

Dr. Janice Howes
Janice Spencer
Lindsay Dickson

Marianne Arab
Cheryl Tschupruk
Heather Brander

Reference:

Canadian Psychological Association. (2020). *Psychology Works Fact Sheet: Psychological Impacts of the Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, <https://cpa.ca/psychology-works-fact-sheet-psychological-impacts-of-the-coronavirus-covid-19/>

© 2020, NSHA Cancer Care Program

This information is to be updated every three years or as clinical practice changes.