Breaking the chains of anxiety and revitalizing your sexual & mental health following cancer treatment.

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Anxiety can sneak in and coil itself around your life and attempt to leave feelings of normalcy a thing in the past. It can make simple and complex tasks overwhelming and cause an inability to focus on necessary interactions. Anxiety can affect relationships with those you love and depend on. You can fight back and gain freedom in your sexual health and wellbeing! Anxiety is not abnormal when dealing with the aftereffects of various cancer treatments. You do not have to stay in the snare of fear and anxiety. Here are some easy-to-follow guidelines to help you manage your anxiety.

According to the [Cleveland Clinic](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9536-anxiety-disorders), anxiety affects at least 30% of adults at some point in their lives. Feeling anxious is not unusual when interviewing for a new job, going on a first date, or speaking in front of an audience. However, anxiety can become a disorder when it:

1. Interferes with your daily function.
2. Causes you to overreact in certain situations.
3. Leaves you experiencing fluctuating emotions in which you feel “out of control”.

Feelings of anxiety present as if you are on a run-away train of emotions and can feel very real when facing a sudden change in your health or a life threating condition. The effects of a cancer diagnosis and ongoing treatments can expose you to a variety of [anxiety disorders](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9536-anxiety-disorders). Signs and symptoms to look out for include:

[Mental Impact](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9536-anxiety-disorders):

* Restlessness or inability to remain calm.
* [Excessive worrying](https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/feelings/anxiety-distress-hp-pdq), fear, apprehension, and/or dread.
* Insomnia or low-quality sleep.
* Repetitive behavior such as eye blinking, nail biting, body rocking, motor, or vocal ticks.
* Feeling panic and uneasiness.
* Uncontrollable and intrusive thoughts.
* Reoccurring thoughts or flashbacks of disturbing or traumatic experiences.

[Physical Impact](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9536-anxiety-disorders):

* Shortness of breath.
* Dry mouth
* Nausea
* Fast heartbeat or palpitations.
* Sweaty palms or increased perspiration.
* Tension in body and muscle.
* Dizziness or feelings of fainting or passing out.

How is anxiety diagnosed and how is it treated?

Anxiety is diagnosed by a medical provider after a thorough examination. The provider will assess if any symptoms are present in your day-to-day activity.

Although stress is a normal part of life, it can surely become problematic when dealing with health complications. The body’s normal response of fight or flight can become chronic and result in depression, dysfunctions, and anxiety in your everyday life. See some techniques below in coping with anxiety in your day-to-day routine:

Speak Up

* Fight anxiety by coming to your medical appointments armed with notes that outline your questions and various symptoms. Being prepared ensures your voice is heard and supports effective communication between you and your medical doctor.

[Get active](https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/exercise-and-stress/art-20044469#:~:text=Exercise%20increases%20your%20overall%20health,%2Dgood%20neurotransmitters%2C%20called%20endorphins.)

* Exercise may benefit you in your health journey. If you’d like to incorporate exercise into your regimen, be sure to start in small increments, especially if battling with fatigue, and ensure you are cleared by your medical doctor before starting any workout routines.
* When you exercise, your body releases neurotransmitters into your body called endorphins that lifts your emotions and mood, helping you feel better in your body and mind. Exercise also protects your body against the harmful negative effects of stress by imitating your body’s fight or flight response and allowing your body to work with your mind in coping and alleviating accumulated stress. Other positive effects of exercise include improved sleep, mood, physical stamina, and control of your overall health.
* Start by adding small sessions of movement into your day. It can be simple walks with a buddy in a park or around your neighborhood, a dance session with a family member, or a light jog around a track. The goal can be 30-minute sessions, three times a week or as tolerated. You can also check out your local gym and sign up for a class that fits your personality. If you do better in a group setting, signing up for an exercise class may be beneficial. If you want a smaller more one-on-one session, you can opt for a personal trainer or go solo with an exercise machine, such as an elliptical, and workout with your iPod to your choice of music, podcast, our audiobook. Click [here](https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/managing-anxiety/exercise-stress-and-anxiety) for more information on exercise options.
* Get outside in nature. Anxiety can make you feel small and caged in. Taking a walk, sitting outside, and listening to the birds or ambient sounds brings you to the place of [guided imagery](https://www.cancercare.org/publications/54-relaxation_techniques_and_mindfulness_practices_coping_with_cancer). Nothing beats getting outside and feeling the wind against your skin, the sensation of grass under your feet, feasting your eyes on the beauty of the sky and greenery around you, or seeing the blooming flowers, but using your imagination to place yourself in such a beautiful scene can be just as calming and soothing for your mind and body.

[Calm your mind](https://www.cancercare.org/publications/54-relaxation_techniques_and_mindfulness_practices_coping_with_cancer)

* Meditation helps you focus your mind on a word or imagery that promotes calmness and stillness. Some use repetitive prayers and others a mantra of words such as “peace”, “I am calm”, or “relax”.
* Breathing techniques are another way to calm your mind and body. You can count “1, 2, 3….” and between each number, be intentional with inhaling and/or exhaling in a slow rhythmic pattern. When you breath you are to:
	1. Take in a slow deep breath. Place your hand on your abdomen and feel it expand.
	2. Count in seconds as you inhale, hold for a few seconds (or however long is comfortable to you), and then allow for a slow exhale.
	3. When you are breathing, be sure to clear your mind of any imagery that inflicts anxiety or any negative strong emotions. One may picture a peaceful stream, or a place you once visited that encourages feelings of peace and calmness.
	4. Repeat steps 1 through 3 as often as you like and be attentive to recognize and intentional in allowing the feelings of calmness to wash over you as you perform slow deep breathing exercises in one’s mind and body.

[Feed yourself well](https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/nutritional-strategies-to-ease-anxiety-201604139441)

* When you are stressed, you may crave all the wrong foods! Fried and sugary foods, sodas, potato chips, rice, pastas, and many more empty calorie foods may leave you feeling depleted, and exhausted, and can lead to obesity. Many of those types of foods contain simple carbohydrate that are quickly metabolized by your body, leaving you with a sugar rush, but still hungry, nutrient deficient, and with continued anxiety and depression.
* Be intentional with what you put in your body. A diet rich in whole grains, fish, vegetables, fiber, and antioxidants points to a better nutrient based diet. Avoid skipping meals as that may lead to a drop in blood sugar and exacerbate many feelings of anxiety, but instead opt for a consistent schedule of a balanced breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with healthy snacks in between as needed. Also, talk to your health care provider about adding probiotics to your diet to aid in digestive health as a large percentage of [serotonin](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/22572-serotonin#:~:text=Serotonin%20is%20a%20chemical%20that,blood%20clotting%20and%20sexual%20desire.) receptors are found in the lining of the gut and can be a natural benefit with treating anxiety and depression.
* Request consultation with a registered dietitian. Dietitians can be a great asset when designing a meal plan. The use of vitamins and minerals in one’s diet, such as Vitamin D, can greatly increase overall health, as well as great protein options from animals and plants, foods with omega-3 fatty acids, and healthy carbohydrates.

Feed your body foods that will help you with your journey towards overall health. Your diet will have to be adjusted depending on if you are going through treatment for active cancer or are in the aftermath of cancer and in need of a balanced diet.

If going through treatment, you may consider smaller meals and snacks throughout the day, instead of three large meals. Often, fatigue and nausea are big factors in nutrition so be sure to talk to your medical doctor or ask for a consult with a registered dietitian for a meal plan appropriate for you.

[Sleep hygiene](https://www.cedars-sinai.org/blog/sleep-stress.html)

 A healthy diet, an exercise plan, and mindful meditation are all helpful and can encourage a successful sleep regimen, but some effort may still be needed on your part. With today’s chaos, it is no wonder about 1 in 3 adults in the United States reported inadequate rest or sleep every day, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/sleep-deprivation#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Centers%20for,at%20least%20once%20a%20month.). Adequate sleep is the fuel to keep you going throughout your day. See below for some tips to help combat sleep disturbances due to anxiety:

* Go to bed and wake up the same time of day, every day, and keep the same schedule for weeknights and weekends. This will help set your sleep-wake cycle in which your body can adjust. Spending time outside in the sunlight and participating in some physical activity can also strengthen your circadian rhythm and prepare you for sleep at night. Although naps can make you feel alert throughout the day and improve performance, it can hinder deep restful sleep at night for those who struggle with insomnia or sleep disorders.
* Create an environment that supports your ability to wind down from the day’s events by setting a time to cease stimulating activities at least one hour before bed. Be intentional in making your environment dark, cool, and quiet. Avoid artificial light by turning off the TV, putting down your phone, and ceasing other distracting devices that overstimulate the brain before bed. Light reading and calming music, or a nice hot bath can help aim your mind and body toward sleep mode.
* Avoid the onset of heartburn by resisting eating spicy food, large quantity of food consumption or heavy food, caffeine (coffee, tea, or chocolate), nicotine, or large water consumption before bed to avoid sleep interruption once fallen asleep. Please note that caffeine can have stimulating response to the body for up to 8 hours so be sure to calculate your last cup of coffee or bottle of soda with your bedtime in mind.
* Don’t wrestle with yourself in trying to force sleep! This will encourage feelings of frustration and anxiety which is counterproductive to falling asleep. Instead, get out of bed and do something restful like reading a book. Avoid activities such as watching TV, eating, or listening to loud, up-beat music as to not stimulate yourself back to a wake cycle.
* If you still struggle with falling asleep, be sure to talk to your medical doctor as there are some behavioral techniques and even medications that can assist you.

 [Medications](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9536-anxiety-disorders) to help with anxiety:

* Antidepressants may be prescribed to you. These medications impact chemicals in your brain that may help improve your overall mood and decrease stress. It can take a while for the medication to build up in your system and start to alleviate your stress so some patience may be needed. If you feel like you want to stop taking your antidepressant medication, be sure to talk to your doctor first.
* Anti-anxiety medications such as [benzodiazepines](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/24570-benzodiazepines-benzos) may be prescribed by your medical doctor. This medication does work quickly but is used with caution as tolerance can develop and lead to dependency. Benzodiazepines, such as Xanax, Valium, Ativan and many others, work to slow down the activity of the brain and nervous system and aim to lessen the sensations of anxiety and are also used to treat other conditions like seizures. Due to the close monitoring needed because of the possibility of misuse, benzodiazepines require a prescription from your medical doctor or health care team member, followed by regular check-ups and assessments. Often, these types of medications are prescribed as a short-term option with an antidepressant added as well with the goal of tapering you off the anti-anxiety medication over time.
* Your doctor may add some other treatments such as heart medications to treat other symptoms for anxiety such as a fast heart rate, shaking, and trembling. Your provider will go over these options in detail during your appointment.

 [Counseling and Therapy Treatments](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/treatments/21208-cognitive-behavioral-therapy-cbt):

* Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be a great option to help alleviate anxiety. This common psychotherapy treatment focuses on managing and changing behavioral patterns and thought processes that contribute to your anxiety. It helps you gain the knowledge and skill needed to recognize, prevent, and address anxiety in your everyday life.
* Exposure therapy is also a treatment that pinpoints the underlying fears that come when in certain situations that you may be avoiding and provides relaxation techniques and imagery to empower you with the necessary tools to combat your anxiety.

If left untreated, how does anxiety affect my sexual health?

[Sexual problems for women after cancer treatment](https://www.urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia/content.aspx?contenttypeid=34&contentid=16110) can be unique and impactful on intimacy and self-image, especially right after treatment ends. Feelings of anxiety or fear impacts the ability to respond to erotic stimuli that leads to sexual arousal. This appears in women as:

* the decrease of lubrication or vaginal dryness
* difficulty in getting aroused.
* pain and irritation during sex
* low sex drive due to anxious thoughts and/or effects of certain medications such as antidepressants.
* changes in or having difficulty obtaining orgasm due to constant worrying, inability to focus, or be in the moment.
* negative outlook in body image and decreased confidence.
* fatigue, pain, and nausea after treatment leading you to avoid sex.
* depression
* lack of communication with partner about sexual changes, special needs, and considerations.
* fear and apprehension of rejection or disappointing partner.

[Sexual problems for men after cancer treatment](https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/life-after-cancer-changes-to-a-mans-sex-life) aligns some with women but differ as they may have difficulty with starting or maintaining an erection. Other symptoms may include:

* erectile dysfunction
* premature ejaculation
* lack of interest in sex
* low self-esteem and poor body image
* depression
* low sex drive due to anxious thoughts and/or effects of certain medications such as antidepressants.
* fatigue, pain, and nausea after treatment leading you to avoid sex.
* poor communication about needs and sexual changes.
* fear and apprehension of rejection or displeasing partner.
* mood changes

Now that you know the symptoms, keeping a journal to jot down questions, concerns, symptoms, feelings, and experiences helps with communication between you and your doctor, and helps you gain control and alleviate symptoms of anxiety as well.

With the [National Cancer Institute](https://seer.cancer.gov/statfacts/html/all.html) stating 2.0 million Americans being diagnosed with cancer this year alone, sexual health is certainly not taboo or a subject in which to be embarrassed or avoided. The most impactful approach to cancer is knowledge. Understanding treatment and its effects on your sexual health before you even start treatment helps empower you and your medical provider in ensuring which treatments are best for you and your significant other.

Take control of your care.

Prepare for your medical visits with a list of questions on hand to place you in a position to be an active participant in your medical care. Medical providers are instrumental in your healing, but no one knows what you need better than you! Use the questions below to support you in this process, along with a checklist that you can take with you to your medical appointments.

To prepare for your medical visits:

* Come armed to your medical appointments with questions each visit. Bring along that health journal or binder that we discussed earlier to help you communicate with your medical doctor.
* Be sure to write in your health journal or binder the list of any questions you may have. Include a log of your symptoms, when they occur, and what brings them on.
* Have prepared a list of medications, including vitamins and supplements, currently taking and any allergies you may have. You can print this information from your patient portal or electronic medical record.
* Bring any concerns for co-pays for medications or medical appointment visits that have become unmanageable.
* Ask how each treatment will affect your sexual health overall.
* Ask about impact to productive health and ability to conceive and/or have biological children (if you desire to be able to do so in the future).
* Write down contact information for the fertility preservation heath care team.
* Ask what can be done before, during, and after treatment to ensure the best outcome in maintaining your sexual health.
* Ask what other specialists may be considered to help with preserving sexual health such as a urologist and endocrinologist.
* Consider advocating for a consult for Pelvic Floor Therapy as it can be effective for men and women in providing treatment for urinary and/or stool incontinence, as well as sexual dysfunction.
* Ask about any assistive devices that may help in having sexual intercourse.
* Consider mindful discussions of the options and potential impacts on your sexual health with your significant other. This allows concerns to be addressed and allows them to feel purposeful in your recovery as they invest in your relationship.
* Consider therapy or counseling to assist in processing the situation and talking it out with your significant other.
* Ask for handouts and educational material from your provider or look up topics from reputable organizations like CancerCare.org or National Institutes of Health.
* Get involved with support services and support groups in which others have similar experiences as you. These services are helpful as they can be in person or even virtual and will help with feelings of isolation.
* Contact your provider for mental health services or the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](file:////Users/shannonpierce/Documents/Pierce%20Health%20Publishing%2C%20LLC/Written%20Articles%20PHP%2C%20LLC/Get%20involved%20with%20support%20services%20and%20support%20groups%20like%20CancerCare.org%2C%20in%20which%20others%20have%20similar%20experiences%20as%20you.%20These%20services%20are%20helpful%20as%20they%20can%20be%20in%20person%20or%20even%20virtual%20and%20will%20help%20with%20feelings%20of%20isolation.) if life gets too overwhelming. (Dial/Text 988 for 24/7 support-USA). Never try to go through this journey alone. Help is available to assist you on your journey toward better sexual health and wellbeing.

Anxiety makes itself known in your journey toward health, but it does not have to take the wheel in your life. Arm yourself with knowledge so you can enhance communication with your partner and have a detailed and open question session with your medical provider before, during, and after treatment. Let’s get you back in control of your life, sexual health, and overall wellbeing!

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