

Anxiety, depression and breast cancer

Anxiety and depression are common in women with breast cancer, but they are often overlooked and, therefore, undertreated. The good news is that there are effective treatments for both anxiety and depression. With careful management, the symptoms of anxiety and depression can be treated along with those of breast cancer so you can live as well as possible.

This fact sheet provides information on anxiety and depression, their links with breast cancer, treatments available for anxiety and depression, and how to help yourself or someone close to you.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. Anxious feelings are a normal reaction to a situation where you feel under pressure. These feelings usually pass once the stressful situation has passed, or the 'stressor' is removed.

However, for some people anxious feelings happen for no apparent reason or are more intense and continue after the stressful event has passed. For a person experiencing anxiety, these intense feelings cannot be brought under control easily. Anxiety can be a serious condition that makes it hard for a person to cope with daily life. There are many types of anxiety and many people with anxiety experience symptoms of more than one type.

Living with breast cancer is one of many things that may trigger anxiety.

Anxiety is common, but the sooner you get help, the sooner you can begin to recover.

Signs of anxiety

The symptoms of anxiety often develop gradually over time. Given that we all experience some anxious feelings, it can be hard to know how much is too much. In order to be diagnosed with an anxiety condition, it must have a major impact on your life, for example finding it difficult to make decisions or finding it hard to go out socially.

There are many types of anxiety, and there are a range of symptoms for each. Anxiety can be expressed in different ways such as uncontrollable worry, intense fear (phobias or panic attacks), upsetting dreams or flashbacks of a traumatic event.

Some common symptoms of anxiety include:

- racing heart
- tightening of the chest
- snowballing worries
- focusing on worry and not being able to distract yourself
- trouble sleeping
- feeling jumpy, restless or shaky.

There are effective treatments available for anxiety.

For more information on anxiety and treatments see the *beyondblue Understanding anxiety* fact sheet or visit www.beyondblue.org.au/anxiety



What is depression?

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time (weeks, months or even years) and sometimes without any apparent reason. Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious condition that has an impact on both physical and emotional wellbeing.

Depression affects how you feel about yourself. You may lose interest in work, hobbies and doing things you normally enjoy. You may lack energy, have difficulty sleeping or sleep more than usual, feel anxious or irritable, or find it hard to concentrate.

The good news is, just like a physical illness, depression is treatable and effective treatments are available.

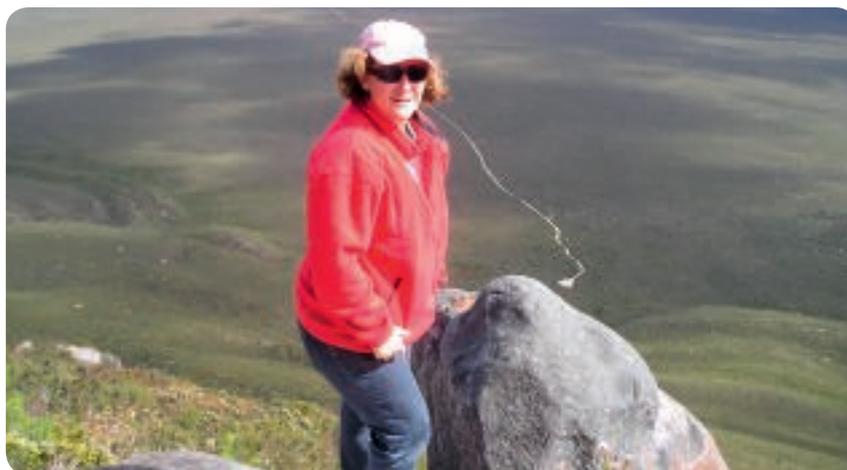
Signs of depression

A person may be depressed if she or he has felt sad, down or miserable most of the time **for more than two weeks** and/or has lost interest or pleasure in usual activities, and has also experienced some of the signs and symptoms in the list below.

It's important to note that everyone experiences some of these symptoms from time to time and it may not necessarily mean you are depressed. Equally, not every person who is experiencing depression will have all of these symptoms. The symptoms will not provide a diagnosis – for that you need to see a health professional – but they can be used as a guide.

Some common symptoms of depression include:

- not going out anymore, loss of interest in enjoyable activities
- withdrawing from close family and friends
- being unable to concentrate and not getting things done at work or home
- feeling overwhelmed, indecisive and lacking in confidence
- increased alcohol and/or drug use
- loss or change of appetite and significant weight loss or gain
- trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep and being tired during the day



- feeling worthless, helpless and guilty
- increased irritability, frustration and moodiness
- feeling unhappy, sad or miserable most of the time
- thoughts such as, "I'm a failure", "Life's not worth living", "People would be better off without me".

As with anxiety, there are effective treatments available for depression. For more information on depression and treatments see *beyondblue's Anxiety and depression: An information booklet* or visit www.beyondblue.org.au/depression

"Depression can hit anybody. It doesn't matter how well-adjusted you are."

– Mary, 62, breast cancer survivor of 13 years

What are the links between anxiety, depression and breast cancer?

Research shows that anxiety and depression are common among women with breast cancer. One study found that up to 50 per cent of women with early breast cancer may experience anxiety and/or depression in the year after diagnosis.¹ It is understood that fewer women experience these conditions in the second, third and fourth years, however up to 15 per cent of women may still experience these conditions in the fifth year after diagnosis. This may be related to a number of different factors.

Physical changes

Symptoms of breast cancer treatment such as tiredness and pain can put a person at greater risk of developing anxiety and depression. It can also make anxiety and depression difficult to diagnose as these symptoms can be masked by side-effects of treatment for breast cancer. In addition to this, some breast cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and hormone therapies, can cause chemical changes in the brain. This can also put a person at greater risk of experiencing anxiety and depression.

Lifestyle changes

When you have breast cancer, there are many changes you may have to deal with including:

- coming to terms with "why me?"
- dealing with the uncertainty of the illness and imagining the worst
- dealing with tiredness and the side effects of treatment
- making family, work and financial adjustments in anticipation of treatment and/or periods of being unwell
- dealing with the response of partners, children, family and friends.

These changes can cause ongoing stress which puts a person at greater risk of experiencing anxiety and depression.

"It was just one thing on top of the other – the surgery, the chemo, my marriage, the kids, my job, thinking about my mortality – and I just hit the wall."

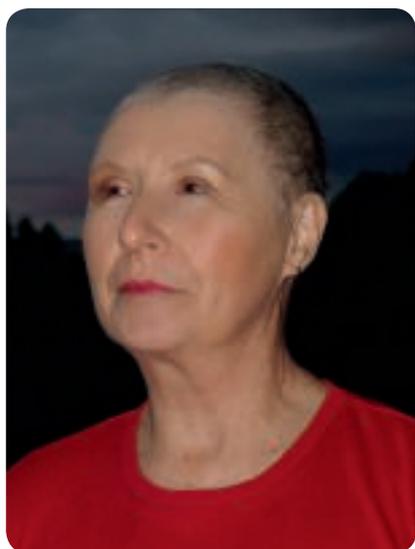
– Judy, 52

What are the treatments for anxiety and depression?

Talking and emotional support can help to reduce the stress of coping with breast cancer, but if things become more difficult, professional help may be needed.

There is no one proven way that people recover from anxiety or depression and it's different for everybody. However, there is a range of effective treatments and health professionals who can help people on the road to recovery. There are also many things that people with anxiety or depression and breast cancer can do to help them to recover and stay well. The important thing is finding the right treatment and the right health professional that works for you.

Different types of anxiety or depression require different types of treatment. These may include physical exercise for preventing and treating mild anxiety and depression, counselling by a trained health professional or, in some circumstances, treatment with antidepressant medications. The treatment for anxiety and depression in someone with breast cancer involves a coordinated approach managed by your primary health professional that monitors and treats the symptoms of anxiety, depression and breast cancer.



"You can get down to the bottom of the spiral and don't know how you're going to get out. If I had got some help earlier, it may not have been so bad."

– Grace, 57, breast cancer survivor of six years

Psychological treatments

Psychological treatments can help with recovery and to prevent anxiety or depression from recurring. These treatments help build skills in coping with stressful life circumstances and can be provided by a psychologist, psychiatrist or other trained health professional.

- **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** is an effective treatment for people with anxiety and depression. It teaches people to evaluate their thinking about common difficulties, helping them to identify unhelpful patterns of thinking and modify these thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations.
- **Interpersonal therapy (IPT)** is also effective for treating depression and some types of anxiety. It helps people find new ways to get along with others and to resolve losses, changes and conflict in relationships.
- **Relaxation training or guided imagery** are techniques which are very effective for reducing anxiety, however they do require practice before the best benefit is achieved. Relaxation CDs are available from Cancer Councils.

"I kept crying all the time, yet I couldn't pinpoint anything actually causing it. I told my GP and she said to me: 'I think you need a safe place to offload'. The improvement and release after a few sessions with a psychologist was immediate – the tears stopped, the cloud lifted, the sun came out and I realised I had been suffering mild depression."

– Loreena, 44, breast cancer survivor of three years

Medication

Antidepressant medication

is sometimes used along with psychological therapies to treat moderate to severe depression and some anxiety conditions.

Making a decision about which antidepressant is best for a person can be complex. The decision will be made in consultation with a doctor, after careful assessment and consideration. The doctor should discuss differences in effects, possible side effects of medications, and whether they can interact with other medications you are taking. Stopping medication should only be done gradually, with a doctor's recommendation and under supervision.

A doctor or treating health professional will take into account several factors when suggesting the most suitable treatment. Regular contact with and ongoing assessment by a doctor to check that treatments are working effectively is an important part of becoming and staying well. Most people taking medication will also benefit from psychological therapies, which will reduce the likelihood of anxiety or depression coming back after the person has stopped taking the medication.

There is a great deal of misinformation about antidepressant medication, but these are the facts:

- *Antidepressant medication doesn't change your personality.* While antidepressants can make you feel better and therefore may make it easier for you to get along with people, they do not change your personality.
- *Taking antidepressant medication is not a sign of weakness.* Depression is an illness, not a character flaw. Taking medication to relieve symptoms does not mean you are weak.
- *Antidepressants are not addictive.* If you stop taking the medication, you may start to feel the way you did before the treatment. Some people confuse this with being addicted.



Antidepressants and tamoxifen

The antidepressant paroxetine (Aropax) reduces the effectiveness of the breast cancer treatment drug tamoxifen, and should therefore be avoided by women taking tamoxifen.

There is a possibility that some other antidepressants may, to a small degree, affect the way that the body responds to tamoxifen. However this has not been proven through research, and not all antidepressants are the same.

If you are taking tamoxifen and an antidepressant, you may like to discuss this with your GP or medical oncologist. If you are considering starting, stopping or altering antidepressant medication, then it's important that you speak with your doctor before making any decisions.

Antidepressants do not reduce the effectiveness of aromatase inhibitors used to treat hormone receptor positive breast cancer.

Who can assist?

A General Practitioner (GP) is a good first step to discuss your concerns. Your GP can:

- make a diagnosis
- check for any physical health problems or medication that may be contributing to your condition
- discuss available treatments

- work with you to draw up a Mental Health Treatment Plan so you can get a Medicare rebate for psychological treatment (if appropriate)
- provide brief counselling or, in some cases, psychological therapies
- prescribe medication
- refer you to a mental health specialist such as a psychologist, social worker or psychiatrist (if appropriate).

It is recommended that you see your regular GP, if you have one, or another GP in the same clinic, as they will be aware of your cancer diagnosis and any other health issues.

You should also let your medical oncologist, or the specialist managing your breast cancer treatment, know if you have anxiety or depression.

Psychologists are health professionals who provide psychological therapies such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT). Psychologists are not doctors and cannot prescribe medication in Australia.

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychiatric assessments, conduct medical tests, provide therapy and prescribe medication. Psychiatrists often use psychological treatments such as

CBT, IPT and/or medication. If your condition requires hospital admission, a psychiatrist will be in charge of your treatment.

Mental health nurses are specially trained to care for people with mental health conditions. They work with psychiatrists and GPs to review a person's mental health, monitor medication and provide information about mental health conditions and treatment. Some have training in psychological therapies.

Social workers in mental health are specially trained to work with people who are experiencing difficulties in life. Social workers can help people find ways to manage more effectively some of the situations that trigger these conditions such as family issues, financial problems, work stress and living arrangements. Mental health social workers can also provide focused psychological self-help strategies. Oncology social workers have experience in supporting people with cancer, and their families.

Occupational therapists in mental health help people who, because of a mental health condition, have difficulty participating in normal, everyday activities. Mental health occupational therapists also provide focused psychological self-help strategies, including relaxation training.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers

understand the mental health issues of Indigenous people and what is needed to provide culturally safe and accessible services. Some may have undertaken training in mental health and psychological therapies. Support provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers might include, but is not limited to, case management, screening, assessment, referrals, transport to and attendance at specialist appointments, education, improving access to mainstream services, advocacy, counselling, support for family and acute distress response.

The cost of treatment from a mental health professional varies. However, in the same way that you can get a Medicare rebate when you see a doctor, you may also be able to get part or all of the consultation fee subsidised when seeing a mental health professional for treatment of anxiety or depression. You will need to see your GP before making the appointment to have a Mental Health Treatment Plan drawn up for you.

See *beyondblue's Getting help – How much does it cost?* fact sheet at www.beyondblue.org.au/resources

To find a mental health practitioner in your area, visit www.beyondblue.org.au/find-a-professional or call the *beyondblue* Support Service on 1300 22 4636.

Helping yourself

“Learn to say ‘no’. If you are tired, don’t say you will go out, babysit or whatever. It took me a couple of months before I learnt this lesson myself. Now, I don’t make any plans definite ‘til the day is here.”

– Mary, 62, breast cancer survivor of 13 years

There are many ways people with anxiety or depression can help themselves to recover. If you have anxiety or depression, the following tips may be helpful.

- Find out as much as you can about anxiety, depression and breast cancer so that you give yourself the best chance at recovery. Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA) has free information kits for women with early and secondary breast cancer. These include tips from women based on their own experiences. To find out more or to order a kit, phone BCNA on **1800 500 258** or visit www.bcna.org.au.
 - Do what you enjoy, such as spending time with the people close to you. This can help reduce stress and improve your overall feelings of wellbeing.
 - Talk to your GP about your treatment options, and ask about a Mental Health Treatment Plan.
- Take your antidepressant medication as prescribed. Talk to your GP if you are finding this difficult to do or if the medicine is too expensive for you.
 - Get help, support and encouragement from family and friends and have them help you follow your treatment plan.
 - Consider joining a breast cancer support group – meeting and talking to people whose experiences are similar to yours helps you realise you’re not alone. Contact BCNA on **1800 500 258** for details about support groups in your area.
 - Try relaxation techniques such as meditation or yoga.
 - Get involved in social activities.
 - Stay active and exercise under the supervision of a doctor.
 - Eat healthily and include a wide variety of nutritious foods.
 - Limit or give up alcohol, tobacco and caffeine.

“Information... that’s what really helps you get through and make sense of it all.”

– Amy, 64, breast cancer survivor of four years



How family and friends can help

When a person has breast cancer and anxiety or depression, it can affect those close to them. It's important for family and friends to look after their own health as well as looking after the person who has breast cancer.

- Learn about the symptoms of anxiety and depression to help you recognise warning signs.
- Encourage your family member to go to the doctor if her anxiety or depression gets worse. Make sure you seek support if you think you need it, too.
- Support your family member by helping her to follow her treatment and mental health plans. Gently remind the person to take her cancer, anxiety and depression medications regularly and to attend all their medical appointments.
- Encourage the person with breast cancer to do things she would normally enjoy.
- Look after your own health by eating well, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and doing things that you enjoy, too.

Images courtesy of Breast Cancer Network Australia.



References

- ¹ Burgess C., Cornelius V., Love S., Graham J., Richards M., Ramirez A. 'Depression and anxiety in women with early breast cancer: five year observational cohort study.' *BMJ*. 330(7493):702, 2005 Mar 26.

Where to find more information

Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)

1800 500 258
www.bcna.org.au

Provides free information and support, including the *My Journey Kit* for women with early breast cancer, *Hope & Hurdles* for women with secondary breast cancer, various booklets and fact sheets, and an online network for people affected by breast cancer.

Cancer Council Helpline

13 11 20
www.cancer.org.au

A free, confidential telephone information and support service. Specially trained staff can answer questions about cancer and offer emotional and practical support.

beyondblue
www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

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✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

mindhealthconnect
www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.

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