

ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND BREAST CANCER

FACT SHEET

June 2019

This fact sheet was produced by Breast Cancer Network Australia

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. While stress and anxious feelings are a common response to a situation where we feel under pressure, they usually pass once the stressful situation has passed, or 'stressor' is removed.

Anxiety is when these anxious feelings don't subside – when they're ongoing and may exist without any particular reason or cause. It's a serious condition that makes it hard to cope with daily life. Everyone feels anxious from time to time, but for someone experiencing anxiety, these feelings can't be easily controlled.

There are many types of anxiety disorders 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 conditions are sometimes not all that obvious as they often develop slowly over time and, given we all experience some anxiety at various points in our lives, it can be hard to know how much is too much.



Normal anxiety tends to be limited in duration and connected with some stressful situation or event, such as a job interview. The type of anxiety experienced by people with an anxiety condition is more frequent or persistent, not always connected to an obvious challenge, and affects their quality of life and day-to-day functioning.

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 visit 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 and makes life more difficult to manage from day to day. You may lose interest in work, hobbies and activities 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 encouraging news is that there are a range of treatments, health professionals and services available to help with depression, as well as information on what you can do to help yourself.

Signs of depression

You may be depressed if, for more than two weeks, you've felt sad, down or miserable most of the time, or have lost interest or pleasure in usual activities, and have also experienced some of the signs and symptoms in the list below.

It's important to remember that we all experience some of these symptoms from time to time, and it may not necessarily mean you're depressed. Equally, not everyone 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 visit beyondblue.org.au/depression.

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

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. 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 you 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 you 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 you 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

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 are a range of effective treatments and health professionals who can help you 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. Different treatments work for different people, and it can take time, strength and patience to find a treatment that's right 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

Psychological treatments

Psychological treatments (also known as talking therapies) can help you change your thinking patterns and improve your coping skills so you're

better equipped to deal with life's stresses and conflicts. As well as supporting your recovery, psychological therapies can also help you stay well by identifying and changing unhelpful thoughts and behaviour. 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 one of the most effective treatments for people with anxiety and depression. It works to change your thoughts and behaviour by teaching you to think rationally about common difficulties, helping you to shift negative or unhelpful thought patterns and reactions to a more realistic, positive and problem-solving approach.
- **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 that 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

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 your 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 a condition, not a character flaw. Taking medication to relieve symptoms does not mean you are weak. Medication helps to bring your body back into balance.
- *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?

Most of us wouldn't try and treat a broken leg ourselves. But when it comes to our mental health we sometimes think we can fix things on our own, or hope the issue just goes away by itself.

That's where health professionals come in. There are plenty of effective treatments for anxiety and depression, and the sooner you seek support, the sooner you can recover.

A **General Practitioner (GP)** is the best starting point for someone seeking professional help. A GP can:

- make a diagnosis
- check for any physical health problems or medication that may be contributing to your condition, or may affect your treatment
- provide information and discuss available treatments, taking your preferences into account
- work with you to draw up a Mental Health Treatment Plan so you can get a Medicare rebate for psychological treatment (if appropriate)
- provide support, brief counselling or, in some cases, more specialised talking therapy
- prescribe medication
- refer you to a mental health specialist such as a psychologist or psychiatrist (if appropriate)
- provide information and support to family members, if you agree
- schedule regular appointments to check how you are going.

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). Clinical psychologists and other psychologists are not doctors and cannot prescribe medication in Australia.

Psychiatrists are doctors who have undergone further training to specialise in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems.



They can make medical and psychiatric assessments, conduct medical tests, provide therapy and also prescribe medication. Psychiatrists often use psychological treatments such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT) and/or medication. If the depression or anxiety is severe and hospital admission is required, a psychiatrist will be in charge of the person's treatment.

Mental health nurses are nurses who have undertaken further training to care for people with mental health conditions. They work in specialist mental health services and with psychiatrists and GPs to review your mental health, monitor medication or other treatment recommended by your GP or psychiatrist, and provide information about mental health conditions and treatment. Some nurses have training in psychological therapies.

Accredited mental health social workers specialise in working with and treating mental health conditions. They draw on a range of theories and therapeutic approaches to work holistically with people to support their recovery and help them to effectively manage or change the situations that may contribute to mental health conditions. Many accredited mental health social workers can provide focused psychological strategies, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT), relaxation training, psycho-education and interpersonal skills training. Oncology social workers are accredited mental health social workers who have special experience in supporting people with cancer, and their families.

Occupational therapists in mental health help people who have difficulty functioning because of a mental health condition to participate 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 health issues of Indigenous people and what is needed to provide culturally safe and accessible services. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers are health workers who work specifically in the mental health area and have specific mental health qualifications. Support provided by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander mental health workers might include, but not be limited to, screening,

assessment, referrals, case management, 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 you see certain mental health professionals 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. Visit the [beyondblue](http://beyondblue.org.au/getting-support) website to find out more information on getting support and how much it costs beyondblue.org.au/getting-support.

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

Cancer centre/treatment centre – your treatment centre may have some of the above professionals attached to its service as part of its care. Ask what services are available, and how they are accessed.

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

Recovery can take time and is different for everyone. As well as getting treatment underway, you'll need to find new ways to manage and live with the changes and challenges of anxiety and/or depression.

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) free My Journey online tool provides tailored information for people diagnosed with early and metastatic breast cancer. This include tips from others based on their own experiences. To find out more or to sign up to online tool, phone BCNA on 1800 500 258 or visit 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 ask them to 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 when you can.
- 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

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 their anxiety or depression gets worse. Make sure you seek support if you think you need it, too.
- Support your family member by helping them to follow their treatment and mental health plans. Gently remind the person to take their cancer, anxiety and depression medications regularly and to attend all their medical appointments.

- Encourage the person with breast cancer to do things they would normally enjoy.
- Look after your own health by eating well, exercising regularly, getting enough sleep and doing things that you enjoy, too.

Where to find more information

Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)

BCNA's free My Journey online tool, provides up-to-date, evidence-based information and support for people diagnosed with early breast cancer or metastatic breast cancer. The information provided by the My Journey online tool is tailored to your individual needs and circumstances at all stages of your breast cancer journey. My Journey can be found at bcna.org.au/myjourney. For more information, call BCNA on 1800 500 258.

BCNA's online network exists to connect you with others going through a similar situation at any time during the night and day. The online network can be found at onlinenetwork.bcna.org.au.

BCNA's Helpline provides support, information and referral for anyone affected by breast cancer. You can contact the Helpline team by phoning 1800 500 258 or by emailing beacon@bcna.org.au.

Cancer Council

Cancer Council has specially trained staff who can answer your questions about cancer and offer emotional or practical support. Visit cancer.org.au or call 13 11 20.

beyondblue

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk it through with the Support Service. Visit beyondblue.org.au.

mindhealthconnect

Access to trusted, mental health and wellbeing information, mental health care services, online programs and resources. Visit mindhealthconnect.org.au.