

Recognizing and Managing Stress

Cancer can amplify the normal sources of stress for patients and caregivers, as well as create new ones. It is natural to experience stress when dealing with illness, but stress can make it more difficult for the body's immune system to function at full strength. This is why it is important to recognize sources of stress, and take steps to manage and minimize stress. Circumstances that create stress may be impossible to eliminate or control, but it is possible to choose how to respond to those circumstances.

Common Symptoms of Stress

- Headaches
- Changes in appetite
- Stomach or bowel problems
- Fatigue
- Muscle aches/tension
- Difficulty Sleeping
- Sexual dysfunction
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating

Tips for Managing Stress

Identify the source of stress

Understanding what causes stress can help patients and caregivers monitor their response and learn to prepare for and deal more effectively with those situations.

Communicate openly with the cancer treatment team

Honest and open communication with doctors, nurses, and anyone else involved in the cancer treatment process can help to address and alleviate concerns that may cause stress. The treatment team should be made aware of any new symptoms or difficulties the patient is experiencing, so that realistic goals can be set for treatment and recovery.

Prioritize tasks

It can be helpful to break time-consuming or complicated tasks into smaller, more manageable ones. These smaller tasks can then be prioritized in order of importance. Learning to recognize when a task is not important enough to worry about can help alleviate the stress of trying to do too much with limited time or energy. Focus on one task at a time.

Accept help

It is perfectly alright to accept help from friends, family, neighbors or fellow church members. If someone asks how they can help, rather than politely brushing it off, instead offer specific suggestions for what would be most helpful. It could be cooking, household chores, running errands, or anything else that needs to be done. Accepting help can be a double blessing, both for the person who receives it and for the one who gives it.

Spend time with God

The Bible and prayer can be a huge source of stress relief. Meditate on encouraging scriptures that offer reminders of God's love and compassion. Set aside time to pray and thank God for His blessings, as well as share the concerns and fears that cause anxiety. It can be helpful to keep a prayer journal and write down meaningful scriptures or spiritual insights.

Make time for hobbies and interests

It is important to set aside some time each day to do things that are enjoyable and personally rewarding. Even a few minutes spent enjoying a favorite activity can be beneficial and relieve stress. Go for a walk, watch a movie, read a book, get a massage, or call a friend. Creative outlets, such as drawing or music, are also good for relaxing and releasing stress.

Exercise regularly

Light exercise and gentle stretching can relieve muscle tension and release endorphins, which can help alleviate stress. A physical therapist can help develop a safe and effective personal exercise plan.

Eat right

A well-balanced diet can provide additional energy which helps when dealing with stressful situations. A registered dietitian can help develop a healthy personal meal plan.

Know your limits

There is no shame in not having the energy or the time to do something. It is important to recognize these limitations, and set expectations and boundaries accordingly. Learning to say no to requests that cause feelings of anxiety and pressure can relieve the stress of being overcommitted. It is also important to get enough sleep and rest, which are not necessarily always the same thing.

Confide in others

Family and friends are a good resource to help share the burden of dealing with cancer. It is important to have open and honest communication with trusted confidants. Patients and caregivers should not feel as though it is necessary to put on a brave face and keep their worries and fears to themselves. Just

talking about these things can help ease the stress. Many people may find that support groups and professional counseling are also good options.