

What You Can Do to Reduce Stress

by Reji Mathew, PhD



When anxiety creeps in, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and let your mind take you to a peaceful place.

Stress management is an essential skill set for coping with a cancer diagnosis. Taking the time to learn how to manage stress can yield invaluable benefits; it can build your emotional resilience to buffer the ups and downs of treatment, boost immunity, and help you stay connected to what is meaningful in your life as you go through medical care.

What is stress management?

It is your ability to manage, both practically and emotionally, the effects of difficult experiences. In each person's life, stress can come from two main sources. The first is "outside-in" (situational), referring to problems in life domains such as social supports, living situation, work

environment, or financial pressures. “Inside-out” (personal) is your particular sensitivity to unexpected emotional or physiological strains that may require more energy.

Since stress is often under-recognized and seldom treated, it is important not to wait until you are stressed out to seek help. Planning for stress with a wide range of tools can help you cope with, tolerate, or alter a stressful situation, which in turn, can build a sense of hope and empowerment.

How do you exhibit stress?

As a first step in building a stress-management self-care plan, it is important to tune in to how you exhibit stress. When you become stressed, what are the signs? Do you experience anxiety, headaches, or insomnia? Do you feel overwhelmed, irritable, isolated, or depressed?

In addition, understanding the stress-distress connection is critical, as the coping skills may differ for each. In other words, you may get through the acute distress of cancer treatments successfully, but even when you are not in acute distress, you still have to deal with the everyday challenges of your life. Everyone needs two sets of skills in their personal stress-management plan: skills for managing acute distressing episodes and skills for handling the daily stressors of life.

Identifying Your Needs

The foundation of every stress-management plan starts with the basics: regular sleep, good nutrition, and exercise. Matching the right stress-management technique to the right need is the next step. Stress reactions can take the form of a wide range of emotional or physical sensations. Moreover, each stage of cancer treatment has its specific

challenges. At diagnosis, you may need social connection as a de-stressor; during treatments, you may need soothing interventions to alleviate fatigue.

Answering the following questions can help to better articulate your stress-management needs:

- What do I need help with in my daily routine?
- If I need to release stress, what is the best way to do it, and how often?
- What is my level of energy right now; what technique is accessible and doable?
- What kind of stress outlet do I need – emotional, physical, spiritual, or sensory?

Talk with your doctor, counselor, or family supports and plan a mix of techniques in your personal stress-management plan. Here are a few suggestions to help you get started:

- **Pacing and Energy Conservation**

If you are experiencing fatigue or low energy, try breaking tasks down into parts, and ask for help if needed. Set priorities, and plan for active rest.

- **Emotional Support**

A cancer diagnosis can trigger all sorts of complicated feelings. Setting up emotional outlets is critical. Common sources of support can be support groups (in person or online); expressive arts (such as music, art, and journaling) for emotional release; meeting with a counselor; and scheduling time with friends.

- **Physical Relaxation**

Doing what you can to exercise and to relax your body is important. Meet with a physical therapist to create a modified program.

- **Mental Relaxation**

Anxiety is a common stress symptom most people with cancer have to contend with. Planning for “mental breaks” daily or weekly can help keep your stress at a manageable level.

- **Finding an Anchor**

Finally, while going through your cancer treatments, it can be helpful to ground yourself with something that anchors you – a spiritual practice, prayer, positive thinking – so the focus of your life is not limited to the cancer experience.

The skills you discover in managing your stress during illness will stay with you long after cancer treatments. Once you adopt this model into your life, you may find you look forward to using it, and perhaps even enjoy experimenting with new strategies for stress management as a resource for lifelong wellness.





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