How to Cope With Cancer and Depression

by ERIC PATTERSON

Dealing With Cancer and Depression

Depression can strike at almost any time. Sometimes the condition begins during periods of calm where your life is steady and stable. More times than not, though, it seems to creep in during a crisis.

These periods of high stress and poor self-care are where depression grows and strengthens because you, as the victim, are more vulnerable. As the negatives in your life grow, the positives can no longer outweigh them. At this point, prevention is no longer an option, and symptoms of depression are likely to begin.

Some events or situations are likely to trigger increased symptoms of depression are:

- A shift in work or relationship status
- Chronic stress from legal or financial issues
- Problems related to trauma events
- Significant life transition (starting college, moving away)
- Death or illness of friend or family member
- Your own illness

If you have recently received a cancer diagnosis, it is easy to see how most of the items from the list could apply to you. A cancer diagnosis can be a major shift in your lifestyle that can lead to changing relationships, work status, and chronic stress as you manage the direct and indirect effects of the condition.

In short, cancer will impact many phases of your mental, physical, and social health. It is your challenge to manage the negative impact of cancer on your life.

What Are the Symptoms of Depression?

Despite the fact that depression is a commonly known mental health disorder, there is some confusion over what actually qualifies as depression. The misunderstandings arise because everyone has periods of sadness, and everyone experiences periods when they don’t feel like completing expected tasks.

Depression is different, though. It will be multiple symptoms of depression occurring more often than not over a stretch of time.

Signs of depression related to your cancer diagnosis might include:

- Feeling sad or irritable more often
- Changes in sleep, eating or weight, and/or energy and motivation
- Feeling or appearing sped up or slowed down
- Decreasing levels of attention and concentration

- Feeling guilt or worthlessness
- Thoughts of death

Depression From Grief and Loss

Too often, people only associate grief and loss issues with death. In reality, a wide range of changes that occur in someone's life can trigger grief and loss symptoms.

So, even if your cancer prognosis is a good one, you could experience aspects of grief and loss. Possible losses include:

- Physical health
- Independence
- Loss of a part of you — in the case of an organ needing to be removed
- Loss of your daily structure and routine due to new appointments or need for dialysis

It is valuable to be aware of the connection between cancer and depression, and even loss. If you never attended to these issues, there is a better chance for depression to grow strong without your knowledge.

By recognizing the potential for grief and loss issues to impact your life, you will be better able to identify depression from early on in its progress. Depression that has been present for shorter periods is easier to battle because it has not had an opportunity to thoroughly disrupt your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Taking Action Against Cancer and Depression

The losses associated with cancer will produce sadness, which is a normal aspect of grief. Some people's sadness will never form into a full depressive episode. These people are more fortunate as many others will experience symptoms that are longer lasting and more intense.

If you are in the unfortunate position of having depression tied to your cancer, recognize that there are steps you can take to reduce your symptoms and improve your life.

Know the Difference

As mentioned, sadness is a typical and expected spinoff of a cancer diagnosis and going through cancer treatment. It is normal and something that will likely resolve over time without much intervention from you or the people in your life.

Depression is never normal. By tracking your symptoms and knowing where they fall, you will be better prepared to either take the needed steps to actively improve your symptoms or simply allow time to heal your wounds.

Communicate Your State

If the conclusion is depression, let other people in your life know where you stand. You are capable of treating your depression alone, but it is more productive with the assistance of others.

Depression is interested in isolating you to keep you removed from your supports in an attempt to lower your self-esteem and build shame. By telling people about your status, you fight against isolation, which combats depression.

If you have difficulty communicating with others, you may try cancer journaling to help you express your thoughts and feelings in a safe space.

Negate the Negatives

The unwanted forces in your life will feed into depression. Work to identify and eliminate the problem areas. Of course, some, like cancer, cannot be eradicated instantly, but others can be addressed swiftly. Consult your supports to see which negatives should go and how to do it.

Plan the Positives

Now that people in your life are aware of your condition, work with them to plan events and opportunities to explore some positive experiences. By doing things you enjoy with people you love, you can break out of the negativity of your situation with cancer.

Keep in mind those positive activities are not always easy. Some days it will be easier to lie on the couch, staring at the TV while your depression grows. Moving, talking, and having new experiences will give you much needed jolt of hope.

Seek the Professionals When Needed

If you had pneumonia, would you treat it yourself? If your house was on fire, would you try to put it out yourself? Hopefully, the answer to both is no.

Qualified therapists can help process the grief and provide healthy depression coping skills and techniques.

Cancer will surely impact your physical health, but the influence on your mental health can be just as detrimental. Cancer and depression can make each day more challenging and frustrating leading to more complicated treatment and a lower quality of life. By managing your cancer and depression, you can help improve the quality and possibly the quantity of your life.