A cancer diagnosis can prove challenging to anyone’s state of mind, often eliciting feelings of anxiety, sadness, grief and frustration. Treatment regimens can also impact patients’ ability to maintain their daily routines, which may increase their risk of depression. But depression doesn’t have to go hand in hand with a cancer diagnosis. There are ways to lower your risk.
Integrative therapies can prove especially beneficial in caring for the whole person—mind, body and spirit—by helping patients deal with the side effects of treatment and improve their overall quality of life. A number of supportive therapies are available to cancer patients as part of the integrative care model. Patients can benefit from laughter therapy, pet therapy, music therapy and spiritual counseling, and they often find that one option works better than another. “Clinicians should try to put together as many of these options as possible as part of a patient’s care plan,” says Dr. David Wakefield, a psychologist in the Mind-Body department at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® in Tulsa.

Cancer and mental health are deeply personal, and the experience is individual for every person. Dr. Wakefield says he has seen firsthand the benefits of treating the whole person, not just the disease.

“The mind, body and spirit have a reciprocal relationship, and each affects the other,” says Dr. Wakefield. “What we believe in our hearts and minds affects our immune system, and our immune system is our body’s defense against illness. Our healing system responds positively to an optimistic attitude and beneficial emotions like love, hope, joy and laughter, and negatively to harmful emotions like hate, loneliness, hopelessness and unforgiveness.”

Mind-body medicine can help address these emotions and assists patients in developing resiliency skills.

“What we believe in our hearts and minds affects our immune system, and our immune system is our body’s defense against illness.”

Dealing with anxiety

Anxiety is one of the most common emotions cancer patients face. Anxiety is future-oriented and can leave patients worrying about the next test result or whether their treatment is working. On the other hand, depression usually develops over problems or events that have happened in the past. The key, Dr. Wakefield says, is to try to avoid focusing on things you can’t control. “I believe it helps to live in the present,” he explains. “Live in the present moment, and you will have less anxiety and less depression.”

Positive distractions help. Many of us fall into psychological ditches that bring us down. We can learn ways to get out of the rut and back on the highway of life, especially with tools used in the field of mind-body medicine. “Our perspective becomes our reality,” says Dr. Wakefield. “How we use our mind is up to us. We can use it as a tool to help us, or a tool to lead us down a negative path.”
Dr. Wakefield says another way to deal with anxiety is “to turn and face what you are afraid of. When we run from fear, it becomes more fearful. When we face fear, it dissipates.”

Facing fatigue
When cancer patients experience fatigue during treatment, it can interfere with their routines, which can increase the risk of depression. The American Cancer Society estimates that 40 percent to 100 percent of cancer patients struggle with fatigue. Many report continued fatigue for months, even years, after completing active treatment. “There is overlap between fatigue and depression. One symptom of depression is a lack of energy,” says Dr. Wakefield, adding that when he sees cancer patients, he makes sure to assess how much fatigue is caused by cancer or treatment and how much is caused by depression.

Exercise can be a powerful tool to counteract cancer-related fatigue. Dr. Wakefield suggests spending 20 to 30 minutes every other day on an activity you enjoy. “The goal of exercising is to get your heart rate up to 1.5 times what your resting heart rate is,” he says.

Other ways to help combat fatigue caused by cancer or its treatment include:

- Getting plenty of rest
- Asking for help with daily chores when needed
- Making sure you are properly hydrated
- Prioritizing your day and completing tasks only when you have enough energy to do so
- Getting a physical checkup to determine if you have other health conditions that can cause fatigue, such as hormonal deficiencies, hypoglycemia, kidney problems, infections, or heart, thyroid or lung issues.

On the other hand, when fatigue is caused by depression, therapy and anti-depressant medication can be helpful. Many cancer patients undergoing treatment, though, loathe adding another pill to their daily regimen. In such cases, laughter therapy may be an option. Dr. Wakefield, for example, often gives his patients a list of the 100 funniest films of all time, compiled by a panel of more than 1,800 experts at the American Film Institute. “Rent a funny movie. Life is too serious to take seriously all the time,” Dr. Wakefield says. “Humor is a good antidote for lack of joy. It is fun, and it is a positive distraction.”

Tips to boost your mental well-being
Dr. Wakefield shares these practical tips on how to maintain mental health during cancer treatment:

- Eat a well-balanced diet: Ensure you are taking in enough calories because calories provide energy. Lean proteins and colorful fruits and vegetables are nutritious choices that can boost your strength and positive attitude.
Go outside: Getting fresh air and sunshine can help clear the mind of negative thoughts.

Make memories: Do not let cancer stop you from living life and enjoying your relationships.

Talk it out: It often helps to talk about your experience. It can be especially beneficial to discuss your thoughts and feelings with another cancer patient. Getting their feedback can open you up to a new perspective. Attending a support group can help you learn how others are managing their challenges.

Grieve losses: Cancer patients often face a number of obstacles, such as losing their sense of independence or their ability to stick to prior plans and goals. Take time to properly grieve these losses, and then choose to move on.

Take your medications and supplements as directed: These can be helpful in dealing with side effects of treatment, as well as fatigue and depression. Talk to your care team before taking any medications or supplements to make sure they are compatible with your treatment plan.

Get financial counseling: You can ease some of your anxiety by talking with an experienced financial counselor who can help you navigate expenses.

Maintain an active social life: Keep up relationships with positive people in your life. “In crisis intervention, the number one predictor of how well you get through it is directly correlated to how much social support you have in your life,” Dr. Wakefield says.

To learn more about how integrative care and mind-body medicine can help you maintain mental health during your cancer journey, visit cancercenter.com.

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