

Managing Your Feelings of Uncertainty

It is normal for you to have feelings of uncertainty. You may find yourself thinking about the future - what might happen and what you will do about it. It is not possible for you or anyone else to know everything that is going to happen.

If you are always thinking about the “what ifs” and worst-case scenarios, worry can become a problem.

It can:

- Keep you from enjoying the good things you have in life now
- Decrease your energy level
- Cause you to feel anxious or depressed

Telling yourself to stop worrying or distracting yourself may work for a short time. It can also make you worry more. Managing your feelings of uncertainty will help you feel better. When you worry less, you think less about what was or what could be.

This handout has exercises to help manage your feelings of uncertainty. You may want to do some or all of these exercises. It is important to give yourself time to try these exercises and find one that works for you. This can take practice and time.

Exercises you can use:

1. Become more comfortable with uncertainty

It is not possible for you to know with 100% certainty what is going to happen in life. Before having cancer, there was uncertainty in your life. Life with and after your cancer treatment may seem even more unpredictable. It can be helpful to become more comfortable with not knowing or not having answers right away. To do this:

Take a minute and think back on your life. Ask yourself these questions and think about your answers:

- "What has been unpredictable before?"
- "Where have I faced uncertainty?"

Now, ask yourself these questions and think about your answers:

- "How have I managed when life was unpredictable or uncertain?"
- "Is it possible to be certain about everything in life?"
- "What are the advantages and disadvantages of needing certainty in life?"
- "How is needing certainty helpful and unhelpful?"
- "Do I always think that bad things will happen because life is uncertain?"

2. Create a worry period

Picture in your mind an inflated balloon. If you tried to push it underwater it would keep popping back up to the surface. The balloon is like your worrisome thoughts. You keep trying to stop the thoughts but they keep coming back. Instead of trying to stop your worries or concerns, let yourself have these thoughts, but put off thinking about them until later. This is called delaying worry. This exercise helps you stop thinking about your worries. It will help you get more control over your worrying.

You can learn to delay worry by creating a “worry period”. To do this:

- Choose a time and place for worrying. Choose the same time every day (for example, in the living room from 5 to 5:15 pm). It is better to choose a time early enough in the day so that you’ll have time to relax your mind before bedtime. Give yourself 15 minutes to worry.
- During your worry period worry about whatever is on your mind. The rest of the day is a worry-free zone. For example, if the fear of your cancer coming back comes up at another time in the day, remind yourself that you will have time to think about it later. You don’t need to worry about it right now. You can write your worry on a piece of paper. Save it for later and continue on with your day.
- Go over your worry list during the worry period. Think about the worries you wrote down during the day. If the thoughts are still bothering you, let yourself worry about them (but only for 15 minutes). If your worries are lessened before the 15 minutes, end your worry period early and enjoy the rest of your day.

3. Challenge your worrisome thoughts

If you find yourself worrying a lot, you may begin to think that your worries will come true. It can be hard for you to stop this way of thinking, but it is possible. You can do this by asking yourself, in your head, these questions and thinking about your answers:

- “Is there proof that what I’m thinking is true?”
- “Is there a better way of looking at my situation?”
- “Is it likely that what I’m scared of will actually happen?”
- “How will worrying help me and how will it hurt me?”
- “What would I say to a friend who has the same worry?”

4. Sharing your worries

It can be difficult to think or talk about your worries (for example: you may be thinking “I am afraid the cancer will come back and I might die”). It may be helpful for you to share (talk about) your worries with someone you trust. Talking about your answers can be helpful:

- “Is my worry or fear true?”
- “Is there additional information or resources I need?”
- “What can I plan for?”
- “What will my plan of action be?”
- “Who can I ask for help?”

5. Setting goals

You may have thoughts that stop you from planning for your future. For example, you may find it hard to see yourself in the future. It is possible to enjoy the present moment (the here and now) while planning for your future. It can be helpful to think about what is important to you and set realistic goals for your future. This can help you regain control of your life. To help you set goals for your future, you may want to:

- Think about how you define “the future”. You can think about: tomorrow, next week, a month from now or a year from now.
- Remind yourself that you are an important person who deserves to enjoy life.

Ask to talk to a cancer centre social worker if you have any questions about the information in this handout.

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