

# What to do if you're feeling down or low



Being given a diagnosis of cancer comes with many challenges.

While everyone's experience is different, some of these challenges may include:

Having to incorporate the illness/ diagnosis/ idea of being a 'cancer patient' or 'cancer survivor' into your self-concept (or way you view yourself) and keeping a sense of independence and control

Needing to manage treatment side effects and the loss of some body parts or functions

Living with the fear of cancer coming back or death

Adjusting to changes in appearance

Dealing with financial insecurity and changes in relationships and roles

So it's no wonder that many people who are faced with cancer feel down at times. However, it's important that you don't assume the following symptoms of depression are side effects of cancer, or things that you should tolerate.

If you experience the following symptoms, make sure you discuss them with your specialist doctor, GP, or speak to someone else such as a professional counsellor or psychologist:

Depressed mood

Loss of pleasure or interest in usual activities

Inability to concentrate

Feelings of guilt or worthlessness

Disturbed sleep patterns

Fatigue or loss of energy

Change in weight or appetite

Slowed movements

Restlessness

Thoughts of death or suicide

## **Identifying triggers/ difficult situations/ warning signs**

When you are feeling down, it's useful to work out exactly what things are associated with feeling this way.

**Consider asking yourself the following questions and writing your answers below.**

**Are there particular days when you tend to feel down? If so, which?**

**Are there particular times of the day when you tend to feel down? If so, when?**

**What is going on around you when you are feeling down?**

*(E.g. you're near particular people, stressful events, there's a lack things to do)*

**Are there particular sorts of thoughts going through your head when you are feeling down? If so, what are they?**

**How would your life be different if you weren't feeling down? What would it look like? What would you be doing?**

Although people might have told you to try to ‘think positive’, chances are it hasn’t been all that helpful. It’s just not that simple. But there’s good news – you don’t need to get into arguments with yourself about the way you’re thinking.

Instead, a useful strategy is to learn how to notice when you’re getting caught up in certain thoughts and work out what effect this is having on you. Is it making you more depressed, or helping you work through a realistic problem? In short, if the thinking is helpful, keep going. If the thinking is unhelpful, keep reading!

If you spend some time working out the kinds of things you’re thinking when you feel down, you might notice a pattern. Often the same topics come up and go round and round in people’s heads. This is called ruminating.

**Using the list of thoughts above as a prompt, write down a list of the five most common topics that go round and round in your head and make you feel down.**

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

You may have noticed that when you’re ruminating about these things it’s more difficult (and sometimes seems less desirable) to solve problems. It’s also often more difficult to focus on what is happening in the world around you.

## ***Disrupting rumination/ stopping difficult ‘stories’ from taking hold***

One way to help distance yourself from these topics or thoughts is to give them a name – for example, the “I now have an ugly body story” or the “cancer is going to come back story”. Giving them a name like this can help you recognise when they spring up and help take some of the heat out of them. By calling them a “story” you’re acknowledging that they’re just thoughts and not necessarily reality.

After giving the story a name (or simply just acknowledging that your mind is getting caught up again), consider what you could be devoting your attention to instead. Many people find it helpful to pay particular attention to what is happening around them in the here and now (e.g. the sound of the birds, the wind on their face). You could also choose to focus on doing something that is important to you (e.g. phoning a friend) and making a particular effort to engage in what you are doing.

Consider this example:

**Situation:** Driving to check up

- **Rumination topic/story:** “The cancer is going to come back”
- **Consequence:** Feel more depressed, almost hit a cyclist

If this person could have noticed when the “story” came up and used this as a cue to change their behaviour and deliberately pay attention to what was happening around them, things may have been different.

An alternative:

**Situation:** Driving to check up

- **Rumination topic/ story:** “The cancer is going to come back”
- **Cue to action/ change attention:** Labelled the thought as just a thought or “story”, not a fact. Returned attention back to driving and made an effort to take particular note of the colours of the other cars on the road.
- **Consequence:** Feel more relaxed and in control when getting to appointment.

**So, let's apply this to you**

Rumination topic/ 'story'	Situations where this normally occurs	My typical reaction to this 'story'	My more present-focused way to respond	How did it go? Result?
<i>E.g. "The cancer is going to come back story"</i>	<i>E.g. Driving to checkups, resting in the afternoon</i>	<i>E.g. Let these thoughts go round and round in my head</i>	<i>(E.g. Go for a walk &amp; notice the sights &amp; sounds around you, call a friend &amp; pay extra attention to what they are saying, look at a painting &amp; notice the colours &amp; brush strokes)</i>	<i>E.g. Calmer, less 'wound up'</i>

## ***Acting the way you would like to feel***

Another useful strategy when you're feeling down is to act the way you would like to feel. When people are down or sick, they tend to lose motivation, energy and interest in many of the things that have given them pleasure and meaning in the past. As a result, they usually become less socially, mentally and physically active, which makes their mood worse. While it can be difficult to find the motivation to do the things you used to enjoy and gain a sense of achievement from, research has shown that taking action even when you don't feel motivated to do so (if you're physically capable) is actually one of the most effective ways of improving your mood. Give it a try for yourself! It's okay to do this gradually, starting with small steps and working up to bigger changes in your routine.

The following questions will help you work out what to do.

**What activities gave you a sense of achievement in the past that you aren't currently doing, but are capable of?**

**Which work tasks or jobs would you feel relieved to complete?**

**Which social activities did you previously enjoy and find important that you no longer do?**

**Are there any family or friends you now spend less time with that you could reconnect with? If so, who?**

**What sorts of activities did you previously find fun, enjoyable or relaxing, but no longer do?** *(E.g. playing cards, walking the dog, painting, playing darts, gardening, riding your motorbike, playing a musical instrument)*

**What types of physical activity did you previously enjoy?**

**From your list of *physical* activities, circle one that you could start doing again in the next week (given your current medical condition/state of health).**

**Now have a look over the other activities you've listed above and choose a few others (3 or 4) to try over the next week.**

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

It's fine to spend small amounts of time doing these activities in the beginning (e.g. 10 minutes in the first week) and with time, work up to spending longer (e.g. 20 minutes in the second week).

To help make it easier to do these things, schedule a time to do each and write these in your diary.

You may then like to rate your mood out of 10 before and after doing each activity so you can keep track of which activities have the biggest impact on your mood.

At the end of each week, look at the list again. Reschedule those activities that improved your mood, consider doing them for a bit longer next time and try a couple of new ones from your list.