

## Maintaining good mental and physical health during COVID-19

Being diagnosed with cancer can be a very difficult and challenging time for our physical and emotional well-being. The outbreak of COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed by this has added an extra layer of uncertainty, and for some increased stress and fear. Many may find themselves asking questions such as how long will this crisis last? How will COVID-19 impact on my cancer treatment? What can I do to protect myself during this time of crisis?

The new social distancing requirements has led to changes in daily routines and disruption to a previous way of being. It can be hard to find a balance in a world which has already been shaken by a cancer diagnosis. It may also feel that every part of daily life is bringing its own challenges.

Living with cancer in this ever changing COVID-19 world, we are continuously being encouraged to take extra care in our emotional wellbeing. We don't always know what this means and what it may look like. To help with this, here are some practical tips you may consider helpful:

### 1. Being good to your body and being good to your mind:

By going back to the basics of eating well, sleeping well and incorporating physical activity into our daily lives we ensure that we are taking care of our bodies and our mind. This can be achieved by:

- a. **Eating well:** Try choosing healthy food options, limit your alcohol and caffeine intake. Good nutrition is good for your body and your emotional well being
- b. **Sleep hygiene:** Try and stick to a sleep routine i.e. going to bed and getting up at the same time each day. Build a technology free winding down period 30 minutes before going to bed.
- c. **Physical activity:** Self isolation and cocooning does not mean that we cannot "move". Find novel ways of exercise, research online for activities that meets your physical level. Physical activity is known to lower stress and anxiety while improve overall wellbeing.

### 2. Stress and Anxiety during COVID-19:

Feeling stress and anxiety during this time of uncertainty is to be expected. It is however important that we learn to manage these feelings of stress and anxiety before they become all consuming. This can be done by:

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- a. **Limiting media exposure** to the pandemic outbreak. Choose one reliable source of information e.g.: HSE website and limit the amount of time you spend of the website e.g. once a day at 5pm.
- b. **Keep things in perspective:** When we feel stressed or anxious, we tend to focus on the worst-case scenario. Consider asking yourself: Am I getting ahead of myself by expecting the worst? Am I overestimating how bad things are? Am I underestimating how well I am coping?
- c. **Validation:** Remind yourself that you are coping to the best of your ability. There is no right or wrong way to do this. If you continue to feel overwhelmed ask for help. Asking for help is a way of coping.

Useful link to minding your mental health during COVID-19:

<https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/mental-health/minding-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak.html>

### 3. Coping strategies

During time of crisis and uncertainty we often forget to draw on coping strategies that we have been using for some time. Remember to:

- a. **Stop trying to control** what you can't: Try redirecting your thoughts away from those things you can't control. For example, we can choose to worry about the negative "what if's" of isolation, or on the opportunities of having this time to rest and maintain our physical strength to get through treatment.

You might find reviewing the following diagram helpful when determining things that you can and cannot control.

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- Identify coping strategies** that you have used in the past to negotiate challenging situations for example, using a journal to write down worrying thoughts.
- Be aware of negative thoughts.** Negative thoughts can be an enemy during this time of crisis and uncertainty. Try and reframe your negative thought or statements into helpful words that support your emotional well-being.

#### 4. Practice self-care

Living with cancer and facing the COVID-19 pandemic we are encouraged to practice self-care more than ever. Self-care includes our emotional and physical wellbeing. Everyone practices self-care differently, here are some examples:

- Practicing **relaxation techniques**, finding time for stillness and focusing on our breath.  
Useful link to Relaxation and visualisation exercises:  
<https://www.stlukesnetwork.ie/patients/patient-support/relaxation.html>
- Making time for and finding new ways of **connecting and reconnecting** with friends and family.
- Doing things that **“spark joy”** in your life

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- d. Practice **gratitude** in your daily life
- e. **Develop a routine** in which you can achieve a sense of balance between giving to others and giving to yourself. Routine during treatment and managing the challenges of COVID19 is important and can be challenging especially if others in the home have no routine of their own, for example, watching NETFLIX at unsociable hours or consuming more alcohol than is the norm.

### 5. COVID -19 precautions are in place to keep you safe

Precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to patients undergoing treatment for cancer are the norm and in place for your safety. While these added restrictions may be anxiety provoking, they are important, try remembering that:

- The isolation and cocooning guidelines being put in place are to keep you safe while undergoing treatment.
- Washing your hands before leaving home and returning from treatment ensure that you and others are protected from infection
- By not touching your face, eyes and mouth ensures that no infection enters your system. This ensures that you are remaining as well as you can during this critical time.
- Speak to your medical team if you have any questions regarding your treatment and the impact of COVID-19

Useful Links:

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/coronavirus.html>

Obtaining accurate information relating to cancer diagnosis, treatment and COVID -19:

<https://www.cancer.ie/cancer-information-and-support/coronavirus-and-cancer-info-for-patients-families-volunteers>

<https://www.mariekeating.ie/covid19/>

If you are feeling you are not coping with your cancer diagnosis and the impact of COVID-19 you are not alone.

Please advise your medical team and request a referral onto the Psycho-oncology department in SLRON.