

Information for Patients and Caregivers

# How to Cope with Stress and Anxiety during COVID-19



Yoga and meditation can help some people with cancer reduce their feelings of anxiety.

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## Summary

People with cancer often have feelings of stress and anxiety, and the COVID-19 pandemic can make those feelings worse. MSK psycho-oncologist Christian Nelson offers tips for coping.

The COVID-19 pandemic is taking an emotional toll on people all over the world. Feelings of worry may seem overwhelming, especially if you were already coping with the stress and anxiety of a cancer diagnosis or cancer treatment.

As a psycho-oncologist, Memorial Sloan Kettering's **Christian Nelson** is dedicated to safeguarding the mental health and well-being of people with cancer both during and after treatment. "Feelings of uncertainty and a loss of control are some of the biggest sources of anxiety for people with cancer," he says. "When you add COVID-19 into the mix, it makes the loss of control feel that much stronger."



Christian Nelson

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Dr. Nelson, who is Chief of the Psychiatry Service in the **Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences**, adds, "COVID-19 causes such intense feelings of uncertainty because we don't know how long the pandemic will last or when we're going to get back to our normal lives. Until that happens, the most important message for people with cancer is that MSK is here to help."

Dr. Nelson provides some strategies to help people with cancer cope with anxiety and gain a sense of control over their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## 1. Acknowledge your feelings.

Accept that this is a stressful time. There will be many emotional ups and downs. Many studies have shown that recognizing the sources of stress can help relieve it. "Acknowledging that others are experiencing the same stresses also normalizes the experience and can help you know you're not alone," Dr. Nelson says.

## 2. Create structure.

People going through cancer treatment are already knocked off their typical daily rhythms, and COVID-19 multiplies that. But having structure in your day can help lessen feelings of anxiety. Try to get up at the same time every morning. Take a shower and get dressed. Make a plan for what you want to do every day and schedule activities to help provide that sense of structure. "These things can help you feel more like yourself," Dr. Nelson says.

## 3. Make connections.

Stay in touch with friends and family, whether on the phone or with video calls. It's not the same as spending time with them in person, but it's better than being isolated. Many community groups have created ways for people to engage with others online. Most religious organizations are running meetings and services by video. "My patients who connect with their friends through video calls tell me that it's really helpful to not only hear people's voices but to see their smiling faces," Dr. Nelson says. (Devices are available to both inpatients and outpatients at MSK who would like to [video chat](#) with friends and family during an appointment or hospital stay.)

**“COVID-19 causes such intense feelings of uncertainty because we don't know how long the pandemic will last or when we're going to get back to our normal lives.”**



**Christian J. Nelson**  
psychologist

#### **4. Engage in activities.**

Brainstorm interesting, enjoyable, and meaningful activities that you can do at home, either alone or with others. This may be spending time with family, playing board games, reading, gardening, cooking, or some other hobby. Consider how you can give back to your community, too.

#### **5. Focus on ways to destress.**

Because of COVID-19, most people can't do the things they normally do to relieve stress. Think about new or different ways to help reduce feelings of worry. It's not one size fits all — it's whatever works for you to relieve your stress. If you like to exercise but can't go to the gym like you usually do, try online classes or go on walks. "One of my patients started journaling, and he found it helpful to write every day about his life," Dr. Nelson says. "[Meditation](#) is also good for many people, and you can easily do it at home."

## 6. Trust your cancer care team.

A common concern among people with cancer is that treatment has changed because of the pandemic. Maybe it's been delayed or the time increments have changed — for example, a therapy might be given every four or five weeks instead of every three weeks. It's important that people speak with their cancer care team about these worries. “I assure my patients that MSK’s oncologists are managing all treatments exactly the way that they should be and always have our patients’ best interests and safety in mind,” Dr. Nelson notes.

## 7. Take advantage of virtual resources.

MSK is making many channels of online support available for people with cancer and their families during social distancing.

- The MSK [Counseling Center](#) is providing care through telemedicine. Our counselors provide therapy to help individuals, couples, families, and caregivers cope with stress, anxiety, and other issues. Our psychiatrists can also prescribe medications to help with many mental health problems.
- MSK’s [Social Work](#) staff is providing [virtual support groups](#). Our regular social work programs remain available for patients.
- Our [Resources for Life After Cancer](#) program offers virtual counseling and support groups for people who have completed their cancer treatment.
- Our [Integrative Medicine Service](#) is providing [online classes](#) in yoga and other types of exercise. We also have mindfulness classes and offer a number of online [meditation programs](#) that people can do anytime to help relax, sleep, or cope with the side effects of treatment.
- [Connections](#), MSK’s online community, allows patients, caregivers, survivors, and friends to exchange support, information, and inspiration.



— *Julie Grisham*

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