

Common reactions to a cancer diagnosis

Being diagnosed with cancer can be described as an 'emotional rollercoaster'. Everyone is different and so will react in a different way. There is no right or wrong way to react to a cancer diagnosis. Your emotional reaction may change over time, day-to-day or even throughout each day. A diagnosis is similar to other times of loss, you may need to grieve for the changes in your life, your expectations, and take time to heal. These are some common emotions that can be experienced at different stages in the adjustment journey:

Shock and denial



Anger



Bargaining and "what if..."



Sadness and feeling low



Acceptance



Common emotional and physiological responses to being diagnosed with cancer:

Re-experiencing

You may see/hear/feel/smell the time of receiving your cancer diagnosis again, such as experiences of nightmares and flashbacks. These may come with no warning or seemingly no conscious control.



Hyper-arousal

Feeling jumpy, panicky, or sensitive to particular sensations or sounds more than normal. This happens as your body is in a heightened state of arousal, paying more attention to your surroundings in an attempt to feel safe.



Changes in mood

You may find your emotions are more changeable or rawer than usual or that you experience lots of different emotions in a short space of time.



Avoidance

You may prefer not to think or talk about your experience of being diagnosed or living with cancer, want to be alone, or avoid places or situations that cause distress.



Physical sensations

As your body is processing this stressful event, you may notice physical symptoms such as palpitations, changes to breathing, poor sleep, nausea, headaches, poor concentration, tension or pain



How you can help yourself?

- Remember your reaction is normal. Allow yourself to experience this range of emotions.
- Allow yourself time
- Talk to people about your experiences
- Rest and eat well
- Think about some activities that you usually enjoy
- Practice stress management techniques, groundings techniques, and welcome relaxation
- Seek help and ask for support
- Focus your attention on elements of your life that you can control and try and let go of the things you cannot.
- Do not bottle up your emotions



How can the Cancer Psychological Service help?

- Help you better understand the cancer-related emotional reactions you are experiencing
- Review your usual coping strategies, and offer some guidance on developing new approaches to help you cope with this adjustment
- Provide a supportive space for you to discuss and explore thoughts, worries, and beliefs that you have experienced

