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## Comprehensive Cancer Information for Patients, Families and Medical Professionals Printed from CancerHelp®

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## Depression 02/03

### -- Overview --

People who face a diagnosis of cancer will experience different levels of stress and emotional upset. Fear of death, interruption of life plans, changes in body image and self-esteem, changes in the social role and lifestyle, and money and legal concerns are important issues in the life of any person with cancer, yet serious depression is not experienced by everyone who is diagnosed with cancer.

There are many misconceptions about cancer and how people cope with it, such as the following: all people with cancer are depressed; depression in a person with cancer is normal; treatment does not help the depression; and everyone with cancer faces suffering and a painful death. Sadness and grief are normal reactions to the crises faced during cancer, and will be experienced at times by all people. Since sadness is common, it is

important to distinguish between "normal" levels of sadness and depression. An important part of cancer care is the recognition of depression that needs to be treated. Some people may have more trouble adjusting to the diagnosis of cancer than others. Major depression is not simply sadness or a blue mood. Major depression affects about 25% of patients and has common symptoms that can be diagnosed and treated.

All people periodically throughout diagnosis, treatment, and survival of cancer will experience reactions of sadness and grief. When people find out they have cancer, they often have feelings of disbelief, denial, or despair. They may also experience difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, anxiety, and a preoccupation with worries about the future. These symptoms and fears usually lessen as a person adjusts to the diagnosis. Signs that a person has adjusted to the diagnosis include an ability to maintain active involvement in daily life activities, and an ability to continue functioning as spouse, parent, employee, or other roles by incorporating treatment into his or her schedule. A person who cannot adjust to the diagnosis after a long period of time, and who loses interest in usual activities, may be depressed. Mild symptoms of depression can be distressing and may be helped with counseling. Even patients without obvious symptoms of depression may benefit from counseling. However, when symptoms are intense and long-lasting, or when they keep coming back, more intensive treatment is important.

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