



## Breast Cancer during COVID-19 crisis

Anxiety and sense of loss of control can be increased significantly for someone coping with a new diagnosis of breast cancer, or undertaking treatment currently. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on every person world-wide. It has created feelings of uncertainty and lack of control, causing worry about becoming unwell with COVID-19, about financial insecurity, about family members such as ageing parents or isolated children, about job losses and business viability.

Women with breast cancer may worry about accessing treatment and tests in a timely way, that members of their medical team may themselves become sick, that someone in their family or their carer may become ill, or that the cancer may progress during this difficult period. This anxiety is added to when we cannot be with those who love and support us.

Dr Charlotte Tottman, a psycho-oncologist, notes that humans don't do well with uncertainty and unpredictability, it makes us feel vulnerable. By obtaining more information and having a sense of predictability (when things will happen), our coping can be enhanced and our feelings of control increased.

The following tips from Dr Tottman may help reduce anxiety and aid in coping during this uncertain time:

- **Have a mental break from breast cancer for much of your day.** Create short term goals that are enjoyable for you and have meaning. These might be projects, activities or events.
- **Create a strategy to cope.** One that has structure and routine in day to day activities. These are the 'non negotiables', shower and daily grooming, planning and preparing meals, some exercise, preferably outside, maintaining contact (via phone or video call) with a friend daily. Consider all the things in your life that you are still able to control rather than focusing so much on those you cannot. Challenge unhelpful or 'catastrophizing' thoughts.
- **Create a 'week at a glance' diary.** Enter all your appointments, who you are to see, questions you have for them. Write down responses and ensure clarity if at first you do not understand the answer. Where possible take someone with you to appointments to record information accurately. Have business cards for each of your treatment team members in your diary. Know who to contact if you have a concern. Find out when you should expect to hear back from members of your treatment team so you can contact them if this doesn't happen. Ask for each member of your treatment team to be copied into correspondence about you. This will reduce inaccurate or incomplete information being made available to those professionals ensuring they are best placed to help you.
- **Rely on accurate sources of information** and become familiar with that which relates to you. Such sources online are Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA), and the Cancer Council Australia. These agencies can also provide printed resources for those with little or no internet access. BCNA has on line support groups available when other support groups are not able to meet face to face.
- **Speak with the professionals in your health care team,** your GP, surgeon, oncologist and breast care nurse. Identify those people who are 'toxic' and undermine your sense of coping and plan to avoid them as much as possible.



- If you have access to a **McGrath Breast Care Nurse**, utilise her to provide the support information and resources you need for yourself and family members. Whilst McGrath Breast Care Nurses are currently not seeing patients face to face they are available via the phone or other means such as FaceTime, Zoom etc. Call the McGrath Foundation to find out if there is a nurse in your area. All consultations are free.
- The **Cancer Council Victoria has trained nurse counsellors available by phone** Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm to provide assistance and support to those with any type of cancer.
- The **Social Worker at your treatment hospital** can be an excellent emotional support as well as providing practical information.

If you feel you are not coping and your anxiety is problematic, speak with your GP. They may discuss a referral to a psychologist to work through your situation or provide other strategies for you.

## Other support organisations

McGrath Foundation 02 89626100 [www.mcgrathfoundation.com.au](http://www.mcgrathfoundation.com.au)

Cancer Council Victoria 13 11 20 [www.cancervic.org.au](http://www.cancervic.org.au)

Lifeline 13 11 14 [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

Beyond Blue 1300 224 636 [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Breast Cancer Network Australia 1800 500 258 [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au)

## Need help to access medical and prescription services?

The [Supporting Telehealth Consultations Fact Sheet](#) (Dept. of Health) outlines how you can access get help to get medicine sent directly to you at home.