



Coping with a serious health event

How to keep mentally well

A sudden or unexpected health event – such as a heart attack, diagnosis of cancer, or other serious illness or injury – can change your life in many ways. Feelings of shock, anger, grief, loss and sadness are common, and usually pass with time. If changes to your life cause ongoing stress, however, you may be at greater risk of developing anxiety or depression.

Take a positive approach to your mental health. Be aware of the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression, and know when to seek help. Being proactive can help you to prevent mental health issues from developing, as well as help in your recovery and adjustment to life after a serious unexpected health event.

If you do experience symptoms of anxiety or depression, talk to your doctor. It's important to remember that there are treatments that work and with the right treatment, most people with anxiety or depression recover.

What is a serious health event?

Examples of a serious health event include a heart attack or stroke, being diagnosed with cancer or another potentially life-threatening illness or being seriously injured. While in some cases you may have had warning signs (e.g. chest pain), in many cases, such an event comes 'out of the blue'. Often, your life changes as a result.

The emotional journey

Along with the *physical* changes that result from a serious health event, it is also common to experience *emotional* and *psychological* reactions. Some may be immediate, while others can develop as you come to terms with your situation. Emotional challenges may include:

- coming to terms with 'Why me? What did I do to deserve this?'
- being faced with your own mortality and thinking 'How serious is this? Am I going to die? What will happen to my family?'
- worrying that each minor ache or pain is the illness returning
- dealing with the uncertainty of the illness, feeling powerless and imagining the worst
- wondering where you fit now in both your professional and personal life
- adjusting to long-term changes to your lifestyle
- grieving for your loss of health or your life as it was before
- making family, work and financial adjustments
- dealing with the responses of partners, children, family and friends.

How you react emotionally depends on many things including your age, personality, life experience, the type of health event that occurs, and the amount of support you have.

With time, most people find that although their life has changed in some ways, in other ways it goes back to its usual pattern. However, if changes cause ongoing stress and worry, you may be at greater risk of developing anxiety or depression.

"I just felt so trapped. I felt really demeaned and isolated and forgotten. I felt very lost because I couldn't go backwards to my old job and my old life, but there was nothing to go forward to. I think it took me about a year of grieving before I could feel that it (stroke) does happen to young people."

– Emma (stroke)

What are 'normal' reactions after a serious health event?

Normal reactions to a serious health event can include:

- forgetfulness, vagueness or feeling numb
- confusion or indecision about treatment options
- feeling overwhelmed, worried or fearful
- feeling you are 'in limbo', with your mind seeming to be half in one place and half in another
- mood swings or over-reaction to small things
- feeling angry, irritable and intolerant
- sadness, grief and a sense of loss

- problems getting to sleep or staying asleep
- loss of appetite
- tiredness and fatigue.

Remember, if you're experiencing a range of difficult emotions, these are a normal reaction to a potentially life-changing situation. You are not 'going crazy' and you are not 'weak'.

"I was sick of the pain and the pain medication. Before this accident, I was an active person going to the gym two to three times a week ... All this stopped. I felt absolutely useless and I was often frustrated and depressed. I couldn't understand why I was in so much pain and not recovering as well as others expected."

– Meg (car accident resulting in spinal fracture)

Will the feelings go away?

Feelings of distress are usually greatest at the time of the event. This distress usually eases over time, but may increase at other times, such as if you're starting treatment, or having medical tests. If you do get distressed, rather than thinking 'I should be over this', recognise that the situation is a trigger for thinking about what you've been through. While you may not be able to avoid triggers, with time you may learn to manage them on your own, or with professional help. Remember to be patient and kind to yourself.

"My first reaction was asking the specialist if I was going to die. I felt numb and disconnected and scared that I had contributed to it with my lifestyle."

– Debra (chronic lymphatic leukaemia)

If you feel you are not managing your distress or coping well, or your feelings are interfering with day-to-day life, you could be at risk of developing anxiety or depression.

In addition, the effects of treatment (e.g. tiredness and pain, or side-effects from medications) can also increase your risk of developing anxiety or depression.

Talking to your doctor, a health professional or a member of your health care team and learning more about these conditions can help you to be aware of some of the signs and symptoms to look for.

What is depression?

Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious illness that has an impact on both physical and mental health. People with depression find it difficult to manage from day to day, and may be reluctant to participate in activities they once enjoyed.

Depression is very common – one in six women and one in eight men will experience depression in their lifetime. For people experiencing a serious health event, this figure is likely to be even higher.

"I was terribly cranky and very depressed and that manifested itself by total lack of interest in everything and a feeling of incredible sadness. You find yourself curled up on the bed in a ball with total lack of motivation and total sadness inside."

– Don (stroke)

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried – it's a serious condition that makes it hard for a person to cope with daily life. We all feel anxious from time to time, but for a person experiencing anxiety, anxious feelings cannot be brought under control easily.

On average, one in three women and one in five men will experience anxiety in their lifetime. Symptoms of anxiety include:

- feeling very worried or anxious most of the time
- finding it hard to calm down
- feeling overwhelmed or frightened by intense panic/anxiety.

"Unless you've had a heart attack and survived, you really honestly don't know how painful the experience is. And I don't mean just the physical pain – it's the emotional pain ... I got to the stage where for a long time I didn't even get out of bed. I never went outside my front door because I was frightened – what if I have another heart attack?"

– Kathleen (heart attack)





Tips for looking after yourself

- Try to express how you feel about the changes in your life. Write down your worries, whatever they are. This can help identify steps that might help you to address your concerns.
 - Talk. Don't bottle up your feelings – discuss them with friends, your partner or family members. Or speak with your doctor, another health professional or a member of your health care team assisting you in your recovery.
 - Spend time with people who make you feel good. Let people know that you want them to listen rather than give advice or make you feel that you need to 'be positive' all the time.
 - It's important to give yourself time to adjust to any change. Be patient and kind to yourself and don't expect miracles. At first, it may feel like you will never come to terms with certain things, but most people say they feel better in time and find a way to cope.
 - Think about how you have faced previous stressful situations in your life and what helped you to cope (and what didn't). Identify possible triggers (e.g. follow-up tests), so you can learn strategies to manage them.
- You may find it helpful to be with other people in the same situation (such as a support group) so you can learn from them and share your experiences. Your health professional should be able to put you in touch with relevant services.
 - Make time to socialise and do what you enjoy. Allowing time to relax can help reduce stress.
 - Try to maintain a good diet, sleep well and get some regular exercise if possible.

Taking action

Sometimes, it can be difficult to know whether you are feeling down because of all the changes in your life, or if you have symptoms of anxiety or depression, or both. In some cases, anxiety or depression can affect people after the initial experience and even beyond treatment.

Talking about it

If you're unsure if what you're feeling is a normal reaction to what is happening in your life, talk to your doctor, another health professional or a member of your health care team. By discussing your experiences with you, a health professional can help you to work out if you may be experiencing anxiety or depression, and whether you could benefit from additional advice or treatment.

Support and treatment

There is a range of effective treatments available for anxiety and depression, and there are many health professionals who can give advice and assistance to help you on the road to recovery. The important thing is finding the right treatment that works for you and a health professional with whom you feel comfortable.

"What took me by surprise was I found myself suffering depression after we had been given the all clear, when I thought we would have been dancing in the streets."

– Rod (head and neck cancer)



For more information about anxiety or depression, including symptom checklists, visit: www.beyondblue.org.au or call 1300 22 4636.

If you, or someone you care about, is in crisis and you think immediate action is needed, call emergency services (triple zero – 000) or go to your local hospital emergency department. Don't leave the person alone unless you are concerned for your own safety.

Tips for family and friends

It's not always easy to help a partner, friend or family member who is adjusting to a serious health event and who may be experiencing anxiety or depression. It can be hard to know what to say or do. If you are concerned, here are some tips that may help.

- Spend time talking about the person's experiences and let them know that you're there to listen without being judgmental.
- Let the person know if you've noticed a change in their behaviour. Suggest they see a doctor or another health professional and/or assist them to make an appointment.
- Offer to go with the person to the doctor or health professional.
- Help the person to find information about anxiety or depression from a website, library or bookshop.
- Encourage the person to try to get enough sleep, exercise and eat well. Discourage them from trying to feel better by using alcohol or other drugs.
- Invite the person out and keep in touch, but don't pressure them to participate in activities.

It would be unhelpful to:

- put pressure on them by telling them to "snap out of it" or "get their act together"
- stay away or avoid them
- tell them they just need to stay busy or get out more.

The information in this document is general advice only. The advice within it may therefore not apply to your circumstances and is not intended to replace the advice of a healthcare professional.

"I was very emotional at first and I found that talking about the experience helped me ... I still feel quite emotional about the whole experience at times when something reminds me, but I prefer to look at the positive side and think of it as one of life's challenges that I managed to survive."

– Maggie (*Meningococcal septicemia*)

"You have to do different things for them, but encourage them, and encourage them in the things that they want to do. You don't have to save them. You have to respect them and make sure they keep their dignity."

– Lyn (*mother of stroke survivor*)

As a family member or friend of a person who is experiencing anxiety or depression, it's important to look after yourself. Take time to relax and enjoy things you like doing, and make sure you eat well, exercise regularly, get enough sleep and limit alcohol intake.

Things to remember

- Anxiety and depression are common, and the risk is higher for people who have experienced a serious health event.
- Don't bottle up your feelings – discuss them with friends, your partner, or family members. Or talk to your doctor, another health professional or a member of your health care team assisting you.
- Take a positive approach to your mental health. Be aware of the signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression, and know when to seek help.
- With the right treatment, most people recover from anxiety and depression.
- **Don't be afraid to seek professional help.**

Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Head to Health

headtohealth.gov.au

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.



facebook.com/beyondblue



[@beyondblue](https://twitter.com/beyondblue)



[@beyondblueofficial](https://www.instagram.com/beyondblueofficial)



[company/beyondblue](https://www.linkedin.com/company/beyondblue)

Donate online www.beyondblue.org.au/donations