

# Depression and Breast Cancer

Breast  
Cancer  
Network  
Australia



beyondblue  
the national depression initiative

This fact sheet was produced by *beyondblue: the national depression initiative* and Breast Cancer Network Australia.

*“Depression can hit anybody. It doesn’t matter how well-adjusted you are.” – Mary, age 62, breast cancer survivor of 13 years*

Being diagnosed and living with breast cancer can take its toll not only on your body, but also your mind. Depression in women with breast cancer is common, but is often overlooked and therefore, undertreated.

This fact sheet provides information on depression, its links with breast cancer, available treatments for depression and how to help yourself or someone close to you.

## WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

*“It would be great if someone had asked ‘How do you feel emotionally out of 10?’ the way they ask about physical pain.” – Judy, age 52, breast cancer survivor of 10 years*

The word *depression* is sometimes used to refer to sadness or a low mood. However, depression is more than just a low mood – it’s a serious illness. It is common to experience a range of emotions and symptoms after a breast cancer diagnosis, including feelings of stress, sadness and anger. However, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time and often without reason. People with depression find it hard to function every day and may be reluctant to participate in activities they once enjoyed.

## WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN DEPRESSION AND BREAST CANCER?

*“It was just one thing on top of the other – the surgery, the chemo, my marriage, the kids, my job, thinking about my mortality – and I just hit the wall.” – Judy, age 52*

Research shows that depression among women with breast cancer is common. One study found that up to 50 per cent of women with early breast cancer may experience depression and/or anxiety in the year after diagnosis.<sup>1</sup> It is understood that fewer women experience these conditions in the second, third and fourth years, however up to 15 per cent of women may still experience these conditions in the fifth year after diagnosis. This may be related to a number of different factors.



Photo courtesy Breast Cancer Network Australia.

## Physical changes

Symptoms of breast cancer treatment such as tiredness and pain can put a person at greater risk of depression. It can also make depression difficult to diagnose as these symptoms can be masked by breast cancer. In addition to this, some breast cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and hormonal therapies can cause chemical changes in the brain. This can also put a person at greater risk of experiencing depression.

## Lifestyle changes

When you have breast cancer, there are many changes that you may have to deal with including:

- coming to terms with “Why me?”
- dealing with the uncertainty of the illness and imagining the worst
- dealing with tiredness and the side-effects of treatment
- making family, work and financial adjustments in anticipation of treatment and/or periods of being unwell
- dealing with the response of partners, children, family and friends.

These changes can cause ongoing stress which puts a person at greater risk of experiencing depression and anxiety.

For more information on anxiety disorders and treatments see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 21 – Anxiety disorders.**

<sup>1</sup> Burgess C. Cornelius V. Love S. Graham J. Richards M. Ramirez A. Depression and anxiety in women with early breast cancer: five year observational cohort study. *BMJ*. 330(7493):702, 2005 Mar 26.

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## DO YOU HAVE DEPRESSION?

Have you, **for more than TWO WEEKS:**

- Felt sad, down or miserable most of the time?
- Lost interest or pleasure in most of your usual activities?

If you answered 'YES' to either of these questions, you may have depression and may like to complete the symptom checklist below. If you did not answer 'YES' to either of these questions, it is unlikely that you have a depressive illness.

**Have you:**

- Lost or gained a lot of weight?  
OR had a decrease or increase in appetite?
- Experienced sleep disturbances?
- Felt slowed down, restless or excessively busy?
- Felt tired or had no energy?
- Felt worthless, excessively guilty OR  
felt guilty about things without a good reason?
- Had poor concentration OR  
had difficulty thinking OR  
been very indecisive?
- Had recurrent thoughts of death?

Add up the number of ticks for your total score: \_\_\_\_\_

## What does your score mean?

(Assuming you answered 'YES' to question 1 and/or question 2)

**4 or less:** You are unlikely to be experiencing a depressive illness

**5 or more:** It is likely that you may be experiencing a depressive illness.

References: American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 4th ed (DSM-IV). Washington, DC: APA, 1994; and, International classification of diseases and related health problems, 10th revision. Geneva, World Health Organisation, 1992-1994.

It's important to note that this checklist provides only a rough guide as to whether you may be experiencing depression and some symptoms may be related to breast cancer treatments. If you're concerned that you or someone you know may have symptoms of depression, it's best to speak to your doctor.

## WHAT HELP IS AVAILABLE FOR DEPRESSION?

*"You can get down to the bottom of the spiral and don't know how you're going to get out. If I had got some help earlier, it may not have been so bad."* – Grace, age 57, breast cancer survivor of six years

Talking and emotional support can help to reduce the stress of coping with breast cancer, but if things become more difficult, professional help may be needed.

It's important to remember that depression is treatable. There is a range of treatments and services for managing depression. Recovery is generally faster the earlier you seek help. The type of treatment will vary according to each individual and the severity of the illness, but a combination of self-help, professional help and treatment is usually most effective.

## Psychological therapies

*"I kept crying all the time, yet I couldn't pinpoint anything actually causing it. I told my GP and she said to me: 'I think you need a safe place to offload'. The improvement and release after a few sessions with a psychologist was immediate – the tears stopped, the cloud lifted, the sun came out and I realised I had been suffering mild depression."* – Loreena, age 44, breast cancer survivor of three years

Psychological treatments, which are also referred to as 'talking therapies' have generally been found to be a very effective way of treating depression, particularly if it is mild to moderate. Psychological treatment may help by changing negative thoughts and feelings and helping people find new ways of thinking and behaving.

There are different types of practitioners who can help.

- **A doctor who is a General Practitioner (GP)** is a good person to talk to about your concerns – as a first step. If the GP has additional training in mental health, he/she can also provide psychological treatment or if not, the GP can provide a referral to a mental health specialist.
- **Psychologists, Social Workers and Occupational Therapists in mental health** specialise in providing non-medical (psychological) treatment for depression and related disorders.



- **Psychiatrists** are doctors who specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychological assessments, conduct medical tests and prescribe medication. They also prescribe psychological treatments.

A rebate can be claimed through Medicare for psychological therapies when a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician refers a person to a registered psychologist, social worker or occupational therapist in mental health. Rebates can be claimed for part of the cost of up to 12 individual consultations (more in exceptional circumstances) and 12 group sessions in a calendar year. For more details, ask your referring doctor or go to the *beyondblue* website [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and download **Fact sheet 24 – Help for Depression under Medicare.**

To find a list of health professionals who provide psychological treatment, click on [Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner](#) or phone the *beyondblue* info line on 1300 22 4636 (local call cost from a landline).

## Antidepressant medication

If a person is only mildly or moderately depressed, psychological treatment alone may be effective. However, if depression is severe or persists, medication may also be needed.

There is a great deal of misinformation about antidepressant medication.

- *Antidepressant medication doesn't change your personality.* While antidepressants can make you feel better and therefore may make it easier for you to get along with people, they do not change your personality.
- *Taking antidepressant medication is not a sign of weakness.* Depression is an illness, not a character flaw. Taking medication to relieve symptoms does not mean you are weak.
- *Antidepressants are non-addictive.* If you stop taking the medication, you may start to feel the way you did before the treatment. Some people confuse this with being addicted.

As with any prescription medication, **you should speak to a doctor if you're considering starting, stopping or altering antidepressant medication, especially as some types of antidepressants may interact with breast cancer treatment.**

## Antidepressants and Tamoxifen

The antidepressant paroxetine (Aropax) reduces the effectiveness of the breast cancer treatment drug Tamoxifen, and should therefore be avoided by women taking Tamoxifen.

There is a possibility that some other antidepressants may, to a small degree, affect the metabolism of Tamoxifen. However this has not been proven through research, and not all antidepressants are the same.

If you are taking Tamoxifen and an antidepressant, you may like to discuss this with your GP or oncologist. If you are considering starting, stopping or altering antidepressant medication, then it's important that you speak with your doctor before making any decisions.

Antidepressants do not reduce the effectiveness of Aromatase Inhibitors.

## Helping yourself

*"Learn to say 'no'. If you are tired, don't say you will go out, babysit or whatever. It took me a couple of months before I learnt this lesson myself. Now, I don't make any plans definite 'til the day is here."* – Mary, age 62, breast cancer survivor of 13 years

There are many ways people with depression can help themselves to recover. If you have depression, the following tips may be helpful.

- Seek help, support and encouragement from family and friends. 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.
- Find out as much as you can about depression and breast cancer so that you feel prepared to give yourself the best chance at recovery. Breast Cancer Network Australia has information packs for women with early and secondary breast cancer. These include tips from women based on their experience. To find out more or to order a free pack, phone BCNA on Freecall 1800 500 258.
- Relax and do what you enjoy, such as spending time with the people close to you. This can help reduce stress and improve your overall feelings of well-being. For more information on reducing stress read *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 6 – Reducing stress.**

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- Consider limiting alcohol intake as this acts as a natural depressant and any relief it provides doesn't last. For more information on reducing drugs and alcohol read *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 9 – Reducing alcohol and other drugs.**
- Consider going to a doctor for regular physical and mental health check-ups so that any problems can be picked up and dealt with as early as possible.
- Some people find joining a breast cancer support group can help – meeting and talking to people whose experiences are similar to yours, helps make you realise you're not alone. Contact Breast Cancer Network Australia on Freecall 1800 500 258 for details about support groups in your area.



Photo courtesy Breast Cancer Network Australia.

## MORE INFORMATION

*"Information...that's what really helps you get through and make sense of it all."* – Amy, age 64, breast cancer survivor of four years

### **beyondblue: the national depression initiative**

For information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and where to get help, visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or phone the *beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636** (local call cost from a landline).

### **Youthbeyondblue**

Young people can also be affected by breast cancer. Information for young people on depression, anxiety and related drug and alcohol problems and how to help a friend is available at [www.youthbeyondblue.com](http://www.youthbeyondblue.com) – *beyondblue's* website for young people.

### **Breast Cancer Network Australia (BCNA)**

BCNA provides a range of resources, including the *My Journey Kit* for women with early breast cancer and the *Hope and Hurdles Pack* for women with secondary breast cancer. *The Beacon* magazine includes women's stories and information on a wide range of issues related to breast cancer. For more information, visit [www.bcna.org.au](http://www.bcna.org.au) or Freecall **1800 500 258**.

### **Lifeline**

**For urgent assistance call Lifeline 13 11 14.**

Lifeline provides telephone counselling 24 hours a day, information and referral to other services.

### **Cancer Council Helpline**

**Call 13 11 20**

Provides information on cancer, referral to other services and support groups – For more information, visit [www.cancer.org.au](http://www.cancer.org.au)

Breast Cancer Network Australia  
293 Camberwell Road, Camberwell VIC 3124  
T: Freecall 1800 500 258  
E: [beacon@bcna.org.au](mailto:beacon@bcna.org.au)  
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