

## CANCER AND DEPRESSION

Dear Dr. K.,

I was diagnosed with breast cancer six months ago. I have had surgery and I am now receiving chemotherapy. I have been depressed for the last few months but my family thinks I should bear the strain and 'deal with it'. I have asked my regular doctor for medication but he feels that my depression is "normal" and that I should learn to cope just like 'everyone else'. What's your opinion?

Lisa

Dear Lisa,

My opinion is that it is a tragedy that anyone suffering the pain of depression does not get treatment or is discouraged from getting help. This goes from problems like hereditary or chemical depression to depressions caused by 'real' problems (like catastrophic illness, deaths, physical and/or emotional abuse). Unfortunately, your experience is not unusual. It is a very common belief (doctors and laymen alike) that being depressed after a diagnosis of cancer is "normal". They further believe that nothing much can be done since it is a 'normal' life occurrence and you have to learn to cope with it just like you have to deal with everyday life. This, of course, is very far from the truth.

There are certainly many issues which arise when we are face to face with a disease that may kill us. Despite having hope that treatment will place the cancer in remission, we also have to face our vulnerability. When we see our vulnerability, we then have to face the prospect of dying. What is happening is that you have lost that 'security' of living. We all have this sense (or illusion) that if we just do the right thing (whatever that is), life will be predictable and routine and that this will go on for us without too many surprises. When cancer strikes (or any horrendous occurrence out of the ordinary), we lose that routine, that predictability and the illusion that we have much control over our lives. We are left with our own vulnerability and the reality that we are not masters of the universe. This can be depressing indeed. Those with a past history of depression are more likely to become depressed when a stressor like a cancer diagnosis arrives. They should definitely talk with their doctor, counselor or psychiatrist, if they had been in treatment.

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If you are finding your depression is interfering with your daily functioning, *definitely* seek out help. Sometimes, when a person is undergoing chemotherapy and feeling the side effects of apathy, fatigue and lack of energy, it may seem like depression. This should be something your doctor should be able to help you with.

Even though all doctors can prescribe antidepressants, this is one situation where I believe a psychiatrist should be involved since he or she is an expert in using these medications. Oftentimes, counseling can be a godsend. You are able to talk with someone about your fears, your anger, and your inner thoughts without worry about being judged. It is very important for you to have someone supportive of you though this; someone who can go to appointments with you and who can also talk with your doctors when you are there. Sometimes you may hear one thing and the doctor is saying another. It is very common, for example, for a person to leave their first appointment after the cancer diagnosis and not remember anything despite receiving detailed information.

You need to put all of your strength into dealing with your illness and not divide it up in fighting a debilitating depression as well. If you doctors are slow to respond, please let me know and perhaps I can recommend someone in your area.

A helpful website is [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov). The American Cancer Society's website is [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org).

Both are excellent resources.

Dr. K.

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Dr. K is Stan Kapuchinski, M.D., a board-certified psychiatrist still practicing in Punta Gorda, FL. For an appointment or if you have questions, please email him at [DrK@StopYourMisery.com](mailto:DrK@StopYourMisery.com). Dr. K.'s book, *Say Goodbye To Your PDI (Personality Disordered Individual), Recognize People Who Make You Miserable and Eliminate Them From Your Life for Good!* is available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), [Barnes & Noble Booksellers](http://Barnes & Noble Booksellers), and [HCI Books](http://HCI Books). Visit his website: [www.StopYourMisery.com](http://www.StopYourMisery.com)

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