

ovacome..  
ovarian cancer

Living with ovarian cancer

# Coping with anxiety



Ovacome is a national charity providing support and information to anyone affected by ovarian cancer.

We run a free telephone and email support line and work to raise awareness and give a voice to all those affected by ovarian cancer.

This booklet is part of our *Living with ovarian cancer* series.

It looks at how people may experience anxiety after an ovarian cancer diagnosis and treatment, ways of coping with anxiety, some self-help techniques and sources of further support.



# Coping with anxiety

Anxiety is the body's natural response to distressing events when you feel vulnerable or under threat. So, it is very understandable to experience anxiety when you are living with and beyond a cancer diagnosis.

## Understanding anxiety

Anxiety can be a physical feeling such as your heart racing, being short of breath, shaky or hot and sweaty. Your mind may be full of anxious thoughts and worries that can be hard to ignore.

Most people feel anxious at times. It is common to experience some anxiety if you are coping with stressful events and changes, especially if these have a big impact on your life.

## The experience of ovarian cancer

Being diagnosed with ovarian cancer, going through surgery, chemotherapy and other treatments are life changing experiences.

You will probably have been anxious during this time. You may have found it hard waiting for test results, or the prospect of treatment, changes to your body or the potential impact cancer has on your quality of life and future plans.

There is no right or wrong way to feel. People deal with having cancer in their own ways and you may feel different from day to day. However, it can be hard to get the emotional help you need.

*"It seems obvious that being diagnosed with and undergoing treatment for a serious physical illness is going to have an impact on someone's mental wellbeing but too often they are treated separately, without much attention given to the person as a whole," says Geoff Heyes of the mental health charity Mind.*

It is understandable if you respond to your experiences with feelings of anxiety. This becomes a problem if your anxiety is excessive and causes you distress that stops you doing your usual day-to-day activities and what you enjoy.

### **Finishing your treatment**

When you have finished your initial treatment your family and friends may assume that this is the end of your cancer experience and expect you to get back to normal.

Meanwhile you may be finding it very difficult to carry on as you were before because you have been through such a distressing time. You may still be recovering and trying to come to terms with changes to your body, your day-to-day life and uncertainty about the future.

You may really miss the care you received in hospital, the relationships with the clinical staff and the security and confidence that gave you. You may look well so people think you have recovered and expect you to do more than you are able to.

When you have finished your treatment or if you move to maintenance treatment you will probably be on a schedule of regular check-ups which can be stressful and anxiety provoking. Some people describe "scanxiety" and have sleepless nights before appointments.

You can share these feelings with the clinic staff. Check with them in case any treatment you are using has a side effect that causes or worsens anxiety.

All these issues mean that finishing hospital treatment and being back at home can be an anxious time. Your family may be anxious about you too.

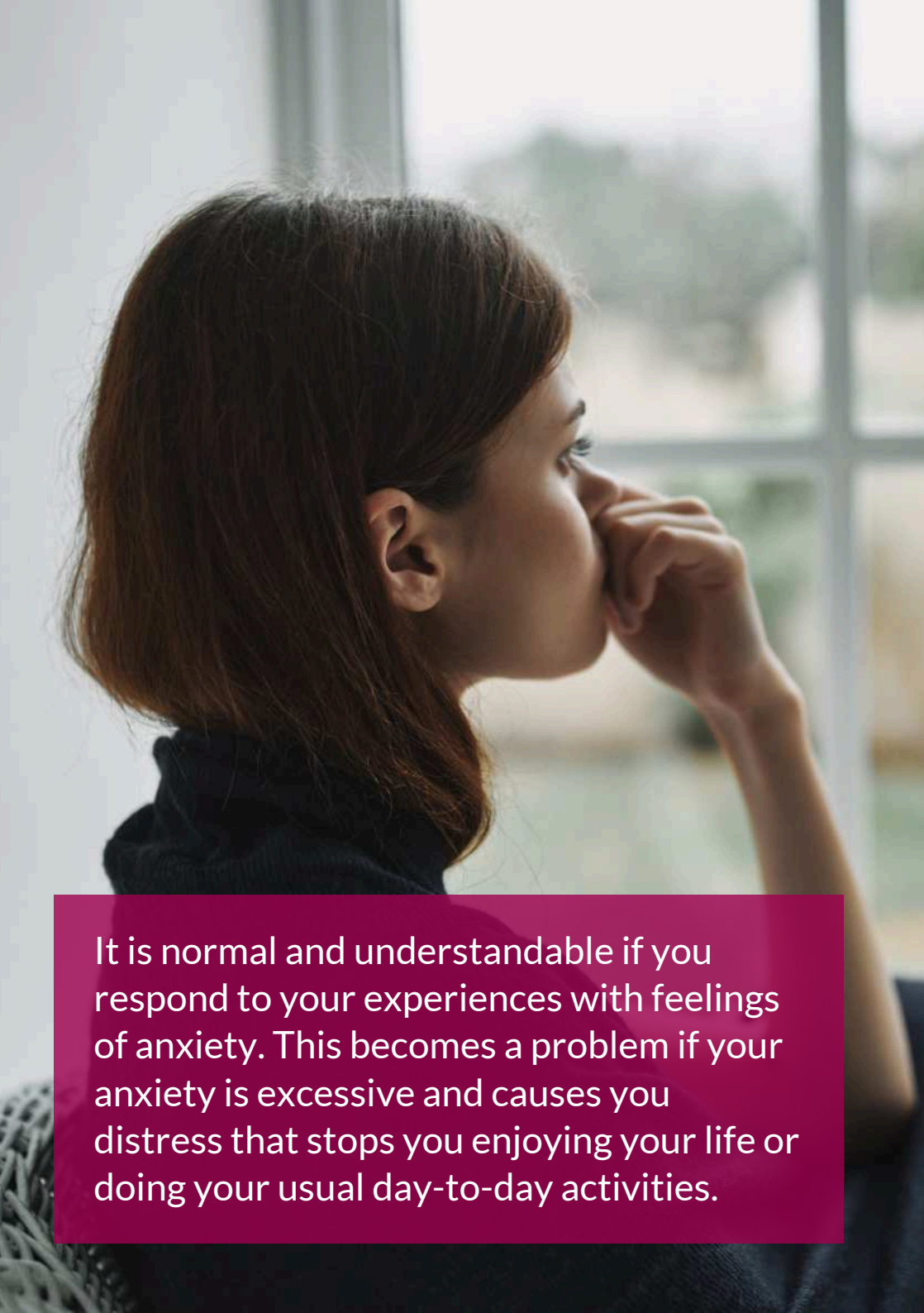
### Thinking about the future

You may be worried that your cancer will come back. Worry about having a recurrence is common and expected. Try not to search for statistics on the internet. Bear in mind that statistical information usually refers to studies carried out on large groups several years ago, so it does not reflect current treatments, and it is hard to apply this data to an individual's situation to make predictions about your future health. Your medical team should be able to provide you with the right information for you and signpost you to appropriate information.

### Some ways to help manage your anxiety

While it is common to feel anxious at times, if you worry that you are not coping this can make you more anxious, which can lead to a difficult cycle of feeling anxious about being anxious. But it can be possible to manage your anxiety. Here are some suggestions that may help you -

- Breathing exercises can calm you. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth counting to four as you breathe in, then pausing and count to six as you breathe out. Keep your shoulders down and put your hand on your stomach, feeling it rise as you breathe in and fall as you breathe out.



It is normal and understandable if you respond to your experiences with feelings of anxiety. This becomes a problem if your anxiety is excessive and causes you distress that stops you enjoying your life or doing your usual day-to-day activities.

- Step away from a stressful situation for just a few minutes. Taking time away from your usual routines and thoughts can help you feel calmer.
- Do some exercise that you enjoy, short walks, swimming or go to the gym.
- Go outside and get into some countryside, a park or a garden if you can.
- Eat regular meals to keep up your energy and to structure your day. Try to eat a balanced diet but include your favourite foods too.
- Avoid caffeine and other stimulants, alcohol which can be a depressant, nonprescribed drugs and smoking.
- Take up your old routines and activities when you can and plan something to look forward to.
- If you are not sleeping well, try going to bed and getting up at the same times every day. If you really can't sleep, then get up for a while and try again later. Try to keep daytime naps to 20 minutes or less. Avoid watching TV or using your mobile phone late at night as this can make it harder to sleep.
- Try to think about one day at a time and perhaps set a small achievable task for that day so you gain some satisfaction and confidence.
- Talking to other people can relieve tension. Sharing and expressing your feelings and being listened to can make you feel better.

- Take up your old routines and activities when you can and plan something to look forward to.
- Writing about your thoughts and feelings can be helpful. If you keep a journal, you can track your own progress and see how your moods change.
- Try to catch your anxious thoughts and then check them.

### **You could ask yourself:**

- How likely is the outcome that you are worried about?
- Is there good evidence for it, or other explanations or possible outcomes?
- Can you look at your situation in other ways?
- What would you say to a friend thinking this way?

Then see if you can change your thoughts and reframe the situation.

### **Plan a strategy for anxious times**

It can help to plan ahead and think of ways of managing experiences and events that cause anxiety. You could:

- Talk to your oncologist or specialist nurse about the signs of your cancer recurring so you know what to look out for. Ask them for advice on how to stay well so you know how best to help yourself. This can give you a sense of having more control of your health.
- Write down your questions so you feel organised and think of something pleasurable to do afterwards. It can sometimes help to have someone you trust join scans and follow-up appointments, but this is not for everyone.



Seek more help if you are finding it hard to enjoy your life and if your anxiety is hard to cope with and affecting you day-to-day. It is always acceptable to ask for more help.



- If there are certain anniversaries that may cause anxiety think about what you might need at those times to manage your feelings and ask for help or for a loved one to keep you company.
- Be kind to yourself. Remind yourself of how far you have come. What would you say to encourage a friend in the same situation?
- Accept that negative thoughts and emotions will occur, but they can pass without taking over.
- Spend time with other people. Sharing how you feel can often help to relieve pressure. Perhaps join a support group or an online community.

## Getting more help

Seek more help if you are finding it hard to enjoy your life and if your anxiety is hard to cope with and affecting you day-to-day.

It is always acceptable to ask for more help. Remember that you are not alone, many people in your situation will have felt the same and remember that you deserve support.

Some cancer hospitals/centres and cancer charities may provide psychological support and other services for you and your loved ones. There may be local psychology services and cancer charities that offer talking therapies. You can also talk to your GP or your oncology team to find out if other help and support is available.

You can call specialist support lines such as the Ovacome support line on 0800 008 7054; talk to mental health organisations, join support groups- see the Ovacome booklet *Living with ovarian cancer: Getting the support you need*, see link below, and ask your family and friends for more help.

## Sources of support

Ovacome support line 0800 008 7054 Monday to Friday 10am-5pm. Email [support@ovacome.org.uk](mailto:support@ovacome.org.uk) or visit [www.ovacome.org.uk/support](http://www.ovacome.org.uk/support)

Ovacome booklet *Living with ovarian cancer: Getting the support you need* is at [www.ovacome.org.uk/getting-support-booklet](http://www.ovacome.org.uk/getting-support-booklet)

Ovacome booklet *Complementary therapies* is at [www.ovacome.org.uk/complementary-therapies-booklet](http://www.ovacome.org.uk/complementary-therapies-booklet)

Ovacome's online community My Ovacome: [ovacome.org.uk/forum](http://ovacome.org.uk/forum)

Maggies centres are based at cancer centres and offer support: [www.maggies.org](http://www.maggies.org)

Macmillan Cancer Support has a range of resources and materials: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Mind mental health charity: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

Headspace offers online meditation: [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com)

The Calm app: [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com)

Anxiety UK: [www.anxietyuk.org.uk](http://www.anxietyuk.org.uk)

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

Ovacome booklet *Living with ovarian cancer: Complementary therapies* is at [www.ovacome.org.uk/complementary-therapies-booklet](http://www.ovacome.org.uk/complementary-therapies-booklet)

You can search for therapists with a specialist interest in cancer in your local area.

We welcome your feedback on this booklet. Please email [ovacome@ovacome.org.uk](mailto:ovacome@ovacome.org.uk) or call 0800 008 7054. If you would like to discuss anything about ovarian cancer, please phone our support line on 0800 008 7054 Monday to Friday between 10am and 5pm. You can also visit our website at [www.ovacome.org.uk](http://www.ovacome.org.uk). This is one of a series of information booklets produced by Ovacome. You can see them here: [ovacome.org.uk/information](http://ovacome.org.uk/information).

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### Disclaimer

Ovacome booklets provide information and support. We make every effort to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information at the time of publication. The information we give is not a substitute for professional medical care. If you suspect you have cancer, you should consult your doctor as quickly as possible. Ovacome cannot accept any liability for any inaccuracy in linked sources.

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