



Receiving a cancer diagnosis is a challenging and emotional experience that can trigger a range of emotions including sadness, anxiousness, worry, anger, disbelief, denial, and confusion. Emotional distress is highest during diagnosis, treatment, and recurrence, but even those who are in post-treatment or have no current evidence of disease are often affected. Those diagnosed with CLL or SLL who have been advised to not start treatment at the time of diagnosis (sometimes called active surveillance or watch and wait) may find this period of time, in particular, to be extremely difficult emotionally.

HOW CAN EMOTIONAL STRESS IMPACT CANCER?

Receiving a cancer diagnosis can trigger a stress response in the body. Stress is not always bad, as it can motivate positive actions such as initiating beneficial lifestyle changes. However, long-term activation of the stress response can be harmful both emotionally and physically. In addition to anxiety and depression, chronic stress can result in sleep problems, a weakened immune system, and even reduce the body's ability to fight the cancer.

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF INCREASED STRESS ON THE MIND AND BODY?

- Physical symptoms can include indigestion, fatigue, rapid heart rate or chest pain, nervousness, shaking, sweating, insomnia, muscle tension, headaches, and changes in appetite.
- Cognitive symptoms can include scattered attention, memory problems, loss of perspective, and obsessive thoughts.
- Emotional symptoms can include anger, impatience, irritability, anxiety, and depression.

WHAT ARE SOME HEALTHY WAYS TO MANAGE THE STRESS ASSOCIATED WITH HAVING CANCER?

It is important to focus on what you can control and take an active role in managing your self-care.

- **Learn as much as you can about your disease:** Visit the CLL Society's website and learn as much as you can about the disease a little at a time. Knowledge is power, and the more informed you are about your cancer and the available treatment options, the less anxious you are likely to feel.
- **Take control of your physical health.** Certain lifestyle practices can reduce certain symptoms of stress.
 - » Prioritize physical activity, as exercise can help improve mood. Even light daily activity can help reduce cancer-related fatigue, improve

your quality of sleep, increase happiness, reduce depression and anxiety, and enhance your quality of life. Talk with your healthcare provider about a physical activity plan that is appropriate for you.

- » Eat a balanced and healthy diet full of fruits, vegetables, and grains to help heal and strengthen your body. Nutritional deficiencies can potentially worsen emotional symptoms.
- **Take control of your thoughts.** Learn to recognize the thoughts that seem to trigger worry, sadness, or anxiousness and apply strategies to respond differently. Some ways to do this include:
 - » **Practicing mindfulness.** Mindfulness involves being focused on the moment instead of worrying about what may or may not happen in the future. Practicing mindfulness for just 10-20 minutes per day can reduce the physiological effects of stress, ease feelings of sadness or anxiousness, improve sleep, reduce fatigue, calm your mind, reduce stress, and enhance working memory. Practicing mindfulness shifts the body from a stress response to a relaxation response. There are two ways to develop mindfulness:
 - **Formal practice** — Dedicate time out of each day to be still. One way to do this is through meditation, which involves focusing on one aspect of yourself. For example, some find it helps to focus on breathing whether it be fast or slow breaths, or deep and shallow breaths. With repeated practice, your brain will be rewired to reduce negative self-talk, which can lead to anxiety and self-doubt.
 - **Informal practice** — Focus on a routine task using all five senses. For instance, when eating a meal, you would not only take note of the taste of the food. You would also purposefully take note of the food's appearance, the smell of the food, sounds while eating, and the texture of the food.



- » **Intentionally finding gratitude.** This is about appreciating the small things in life that are often taken for granted by taking time to notice the beauty around you, the kindness of others, or focusing on the simple pleasures in life. Intentional gratitude has been shown to improve psychological well-being, decrease post-traumatic stress, and reduce the risk of developing depression and anxiety. Some prefer to go about this by keeping a gratitude journal where you write down the things you are grateful for each day.
- » **Practicing self-compassion.** Be kind and nurturing to yourself so that you are getting what you need to set the stage for better health, relationships, and general well-being. For example, if you are feeling tired, take a nap. If you are feeling anxious, take a break and practice some deep breathing techniques. Rest and do not try to fight against your symptoms. This can also mean being willing to accept help from loved ones to reduce your daily stress.
- **Build a network of support.** You are not alone. Talking to others when you are going through a tough time can be crucial for overall emotional wellness. Talk to someone you trust about your fears and concerns and how you feel you are coping. Sharing your feelings with those you trust may also help you get the support you need. Remember, it is okay to ask for help.
- » **Find a support group:** Consider joining one of CLL Society's support groups. There are multiple ones to choose from nationwide that are led by trained facilitators who also have a CLL or SLL diagnosis. Well-led support groups also provide the opportunity for you to connect with others who are experiencing a similar diagnosis and understand what you are going through.
- **Find your joy.** Take time for relaxing activities you enjoy such as music, art, yoga, journaling, gardening, or any other hobbies that make you feel good.

IS IT NECESSARY TO DISCUSS EMOTIONAL WELLNESS WITH MY CANCER HEALTHCARE TEAM?

Yes. Your mental health and emotional wellness are a vital part of comprehensive cancer care. When your emotional health needs are met, you are in a better position to manage the demands of living with a chronic disease. It is important to talk with your healthcare team about how you are feeling and seek professional support especially when there are any signs of ongoing distress. Let them know if you have any history of anxiety, depression, or any other mental health conditions. It is also important that your healthcare provider be aware when symptoms of stress are present so that other causes (such as nutritional deficiencies, thyroid dysfunction, or other illnesses) can be ruled out.

Addressing emotional wellness should be regularly discussed with your healthcare team, just the same as your physical symptoms. This is because it is normal to have different needs at different points along your cancer journey and there are many good resources available to assist you. Having the support you need can improve your quality of life and lead to better health outcomes. Together, you can decide upon the best strategies that will help you navigate and manage the emotional impact of living with a chronic cancer diagnosis.

CLL SOCIETY MISSION

CLL Society is an inclusive, patient-centric, physician-curated nonprofit organization that addresses the unmet needs of the chronic lymphocytic leukemia and small lymphocytic lymphoma (CLL/SLL) community through patient education, advocacy, support, and research.