

Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA)



CANSA Fact Sheet on Cancer and Mental Health

Introduction

Cancer diagnosis and treatment may often lead to emotional and mental health challenges, including sadness, anxiety, depression, and isolation, affecting not only patients but also their families and caregivers. These psychological effects can interfere with daily life and require professional support, which may include counselling, therapy, medication, or support groups. Seeking help is crucial, as these feelings are common reactions to a serious illness and can be treated to improve quality of life and coping mechanisms.

[Picture Credit: Mental Health]



The World Health Organization defines mental health as: "... a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development."

(World Health Organization, 2022).

Cancer and Mental Health

According to recent new study, one out of three people diagnosed with cancer also wind up struggling with a mental health disorder such as anxiety or depression. Freidouni, et al., (2024) are of the opinion that because cancer is such a complex disease which affects not only the physical and psychological wellbeing of patients, but also their families and caregivers, the resultant effects impact their treatment adherence, quality of life, and overall health outcomes. They also say that approximately 30% of cancer patients experience cancer-related psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress. Also, caregivers of cancer patients can experience significant emotional, physical, and financial stress, which can have a negative impact on their health. Therefore mental health resources should be integrated into cancer care settings to identify and intervene early. Specific mention is made of providing psychological support, counselling, and coping strategies will contribute to creating a safe and supportive environment where individuals can express their

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emotions, reducing feelings of isolation and depression. There are, however, some important barriers to accessing mental health support for individuals with cancer, including stigma, cultural attitudes, and financial and logistical challenges. Healthcare providers should continue to develop and implement innovative approaches to mental health care that are tailored to the essential requirements of individuals with cancer to enhance knowledge regarding the key roles of mental health care for individuals with cancer.

Zhong, C., Luo, X., Tan, M., Chi, J., Guo, B., Tang, J., Guo, Z., Deng, S., Zhang, Y. & Wu, Y. 2025.

Background: Mental health plays a key role across the cancer care continuum, from prognosis and active treatment to survivorship and palliative care. Digital health technologies offer an appealing, cost-effective tool to address psychological needs.

Objective: This umbrella review aims to summarize and evaluate the available evidence on the efficacy of digital health interventions for improving mental health and psychosocial outcomes for populations with cancer.

Methods: Literature searches were conducted in Embase, PsycINFO, PubMed, CINAHL, the Cochrane Library, and Web of Science from their inception to February 4, 2024. Systematic reviews (with or without meta-analysis) investigating the efficacy of digital health interventions for psychosocial variables in patients with cancer were included. Quality was assessed using the Assessing the Methodological Quality of Systematic Reviews-2 tool.

Results: In total, 78 systematic reviews were included in this review. Among diverse delivery modalities and types of digital interventions, websites and smartphone apps were the most commonly used. Depression was the most frequently addressed, followed by quality of life, anxiety, fatigue, and distress. The qualities of the reviews ranged from critically low to high. Generally, despite great heterogeneity in the strength and credibility of the evidence, digital health interventions were shown to be effective for mental health in patients with cancer.

Conclusions: Taken together, digital health interventions show benefits for patients with cancer in improving mental health. Various gaps were identified, such as little research specifically focusing on older adult patients with cancer, a scarcity of reporting high-precision emotion management, and insufficient attention to other certain mood indicators. Further exploration of studies with standardized and rigorous approaches is required to inform practice.

Trial registration: PROSPERO CRD42024565084; <https://tinyurl.com/4cbxjeh9>.

Ge, M.W., Sheng, J., Shen, L.T., Hu, F.H., Jia, Y.J., Ur-Rehman, A., Li, W., Lan, J.Z., Liu, P. & Chen, H.L. 2025.

Background: With the improvement of medical treatment, the survival rate of cancer patients continues to rise; however, their psychological issues require further management. Currently, there is uncertainty regarding the prevalence of mental health problems among cancer survivors.

Objective: To quantitatively summarize the global prevalence of mental health problems in cancer survivors.

Methods: We searched CINAHL, PsychINFO, Embase, Web of Science, and PubMed for studies reporting the prevalence of various mental health problems in cancer survivors who have survived at least 3 months. Subsequently, stratified analyses were conducted based on study design, region, cancer system, and time since diagnosis. Moreover, meta-regression was utilized to investigate sources of heterogeneity. We used Rstudio software 4.3.0, Stata 17.0 software and metaprop package.

Results: A total of 147 studies involving 135,015 cancer survivors from over 30 countries were identified, primarily focusing on six mental health problems. Among 78 studies addressing anxiety, the prevalence was 24.4% (95% CI: 20.2%-28.8%). Among the 96 studies on depression, the prevalence was 23.7% (95% CI: 20.1%-27.4%). In the case of sleep disorders, 42 studies reported a prevalence of

34.1% (95% CI: 27.9%-40.6%). The overall prevalence decreased over time since diagnosis. Most of the analyzed data exhibited significant heterogeneity ($I^2 > 75\%$).

Conclusion: The analysis indicated that cancer survivors experience a diverse range of mental health problems, which were prevalent among them. The results emphasized the importance of recognizing and treating mental health problems in cancer survivors and served as a reminder for healthcare workers to address mental health problems in this population. The registration number was CRD42023466209.

Signs and Symptoms of Mental Health Problems

The American Psychiatric Association states that if several of the following are occurring, it may be useful to follow up with a mental health professional.

- Withdrawal — Recent social withdrawal and loss of interest in others
- Drop in functioning — An unusual drop in functioning, at school, work or social activities, such as quitting sports, failing in school or difficulty performing familiar tasks
- Problems thinking — Problems with concentration, memory or logical thought and speech that are hard to explain
- Increased sensitivity — Heightened sensitivity to sights, sounds, smells or touch; avoidance of over-stimulating situations
- Apathy — Loss of initiative or desire to participate in any activity
- Feeling disconnected — A vague feeling of being disconnected from oneself or one's surroundings; a sense of unreality
- Illogical thinking — Unusual or exaggerated beliefs about personal powers to understand meanings or influence events; illogical or "magical" thinking typical of childhood in an adult
- Nervousness — Fear or suspiciousness of others or a strong nervous feeling
- Unusual behaviour — Odd, uncharacteristic, peculiar behaviour
- Sleep or appetite changes — Dramatic sleep and appetite changes or decline in personal care
- Mood changes — Rapid or dramatic shifts in feelings

(US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2024; London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2024; Mental Health America, 2025; Macmillan Cancer Support, 2025. UHSU Knight Cancer Institute, 2025),

Distress and Mental Health

Nearly half of cancer patients report experiencing a lot of distress. According to the Yale Cancer Centre, patients with lung, pancreatic and brain cancers may be more likely to report distress, but in general, the type of cancer does not make a difference. Factors that increase the risk of anxiety and distress are not always related to the cancer.

The following may be risk factors for high levels of distress in patients with cancer:

- Trouble doing the usual activities of daily living
- Physical symptoms and side effects (such as fatigue, nausea, or pain)
- Problems at home
- Depression or other mental or emotional problems
- Being younger, non-white, or female
- Having a lower level of education

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Dealing with an illness as serious as cancer is no small matter. A cancer diagnosis is often accompanied by swift and aggressive treatment, and it is all but expected that a person will be overwhelmed, worried, fearful and anxious while doctors focus on their medical well-being.

It is true that anxiety and depression are two very real and very common consequences of a cancer diagnosis. Although expected to occur, these two conditions should not be ignored. Addressing the mental health needs of cancer patients at all ages is essential and counselling for cancer patients is valuable for its own sake. It does go a step further: failing to address these concerns may actually decrease the patient's odds of recovery. (BMC Psychology, 2025).

Sadness and Mental Health



It's normal to feel sad after you have been diagnosed with cancer. You might be sad that you have lost your good health and ability to do some things that you enjoy. It might be the uncertainty of the future that upsets you most.

[Picture Credit: Sadness]

It may be there all the time. Or the sadness may come and go, depending on what else is happening in your life.

People often say they are depressed instead of sad. But sadness is different from depression. Sadness is a natural part of any loss, grief, change or disappointment.

While feelings of sadness and distress are normal responses to a cancer diagnosis, persistent, debilitating depression requires professional help to address psychological or biological causes. Support from family, caregivers, and mental health professionals is crucial for patients to manage mental health challenges, improve quality of life, and potentially impact cancer outcomes, (Cancer Research UK, 2022).

Depression and Mental Health



Depression is common in cancer patients due to emotional, physical, and life-altering aspects of the illness, with a significantly higher rate of occurrence than in the general population.

[Picture Credit: Depression]

Many cancer patients go through episodes of depression. Depression makes your entire experience with cancer more difficult, weakens your resilience, and may hamper your overall adjustment. It also can undermine your will to live and compromise the

courage, fortitude, and determination that you need to face cancer and to endure the necessary medical treatments.

(Stanford Medicine, 2025; Cancer Research UK, 2022).

Isolation and Mental Health

[Picture Credit: Isolation]



Isolation and a cancer diagnosis are closely linked, with higher rates of isolation leading to increased risks of anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts, as well as poorer physical health outcomes and higher mortality rates for cancer patients and survivors. This disconnection can stem from feeling misunderstood by others, the difficulty of discussing complex emotions related to the illness, or friends and family withdrawing from the patient, a phenomenon sometimes called

"cancer ghosting". Addressing isolation is vital, requiring supportive interventions to improve mental and physical well-being throughout the cancer journey and survivorship. (Frontiers, 2025).

Cancer Survivorship and Mental Health



Mental health for cancer survivors in both research and clinical applications has strongly adopted a traditional nosological approach, involving the classification of psychopathology into discrete disorders. However, this approach has recently faced considerable criticism due to issues such as high comorbidity and within-disorder symptom heterogeneity across populations.

[Picture Credit: Cancer Survivor]

Moreover, there are additional specific issues impacting the validity of traditional approaches in cancer survivorship populations, including the physiological effects of cancer and its treatments. In response, we provide the case for the hierarchical dimensional approach within psycho-oncology, in particular the Hierarchical Taxonomy of Psychopathology (HiTOP). We discuss not only the potential utility of HiTOP to research and clinical applications within psycho-oncology, but also its limitations, and what is required to apply this approach within cancer survivorship. (Cancer Survivorship, 2025; Science Direct, 2025).

Medical Disclaimer

This Fact Sheet is intended to provide general information only and, as such, should not be considered as a substitute for advice, medically or otherwise, covering any specific situation. Users should seek appropriate advice before taking or refraining from taking any action in reliance on any information contained in this Fact Sheet. So far as permissible by law, the Cancer Association of South Africa

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