

Brain tumours, depression and anxiety disorders



FACT SHEET 46

People can develop brain tumours at any age, and commonly they can affect people's *mental* and *physical* health. For many, the outlook is uncertain, which can place great emotional strain on those affected, as well as on their family and friends.

Quality of life can also be affected by some other illnesses connected to the diagnosis and treatment of brain tumours, including depression and anxiety disorders. In turn, depression and anxiety disorders make it more difficult to adjust to the diagnosis and cope with the changes associated with having a brain tumour.

Living with a brain tumour can be very challenging for everyone involved, regardless of the type or severity of the tumour. Being aware of the early signs of mental health problems is important so that those affected can get the right treatment.

This fact sheet outlines the links between brain tumours and depression and anxiety disorders, and gives practical advice on how to manage these conditions if they occur.

WHAT ARE BRAIN TUMOURS?

Primary brain tumours develop from brain cells and can be either benign or malignant. Generally, benign tumours remain in the part of the brain in which they started, which can be problematic depending on the location, while malignant tumours can spread into the surrounding brain tissue. Both types of tumours can cause pressure and damage to the brain. The cause of most primary brain tumours is unknown. Secondary brain tumours can occur when cancer cells from other parts of the body spread to the brain.

Around 1,400 Australians are diagnosed with a malignant primary brain tumour each year.¹ Although primary brain tumours account for less than 2 per cent of cancers in Australia, they can impose a large burden on individuals, families and carers.

Treatment usually involves surgery to remove as much of the tumour as possible, generally followed by radiotherapy and/or chemotherapy. Benign tumours can be as difficult to treat as malignant tumours, depending on their location within the brain and whether surrounding brain tissue could be damaged by surgery. Treatment for primary brain tumours may start very quickly, which means the person affected and his/her family and friends may have little time to come to terms with the diagnosis before treatment begins.

There are many types of brain tumours and the likely outcome varies, depending on the type and grade of tumour. Many tumours are treatable, while others are controllable for years. Some tumours respond to treatment initially, but have a tendency to come back. Therefore, many people with brain tumours have to adapt to living with the effects of the tumour, its treatment and the threat of a recurrence.

While some people with a brain tumour make a complete recovery after treatment, most require some support and care in the following years, particularly from relatives and friends. The stress associated with giving this care can be considerable.

THE EFFECTS OF BRAIN TUMOURS

Brain tumours can cause a variety of symptoms – these can take the form of *neurologic symptoms* (e.g. headaches, dizziness, impairment of speech or movement), *cognitive changes* (e.g. memory problems) and *behavioural changes* (changes in the way people think or act). These effects can be due to the brain tumour itself, or to surgery, medication (such as steroids which are commonly used to reduce swelling in the brain), or other treatments such as radiotherapy or chemotherapy.

Changes can be short-term or lifelong, may get better or worse over time, and may include:²

- *Anger* – showing verbal aggression, acting in physically aggressive ways, being annoyed easily or being impatient
- *Attention and concentration* – being disorganised or having trouble doing two or more things at the same time (i.e. multi-tasking)
- *Communication* – interrupting the conversation or talking out of turn, having trouble finding words
- *Confusion or disorientation* – not knowing where you are, who you are, or what day it is
- *Self-focus* – focusing on your own needs, feelings, and circumstances, having less ability to empathise with others, being insensitive to the needs or concerns of others
- *Problem-solving and organisation* – having difficulty with tasks such as planning and seeing the consequences of actions, organisation and 'seeing the bigger picture', problem-solving, setting priorities, and responding to unexpected situations
- *Fatigue* – feeling sleepy during the day and generally feeling tired and listless

¹ AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) & AACR (Australasian Association of Cancer Registries) 2008. *Cancer in Australia: an overview, 2008*. Cancer series no. 46. Cat. no. CAN 42. Canberra: AIHW.

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- *Impulsive behaviour* – appearing to act or speak without thinking in advance
- *Inappropriate behaviour* – behaving in a way that is inappropriate (e.g. laughing too easily or at inappropriate times, talking too much about sex)
- *Emotional changes* – experiencing sudden changes in feelings, often for no apparent reason (e.g. crying over nothing or laughing at things that are not funny)
- *Apathy* – lacking interest or concern, even in relation to matters of importance
- *Personal care* – no longer caring about showering, dressing, cooking or eating
- *Memory* – difficulty storing, retaining and recalling past experiences and information
- *Repetition* – frequently repeating certain actions or getting stuck on ideas.

Experiencing any of these symptoms can be distressing and frustrating for the person with the brain tumour and for their family members and carers.

WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN BRAIN TUMOURS, DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Studies report depression rates in people with brain tumours range from 15 per cent to 38 per cent, although it is suggested these rates are likely to under-represent the true incidence.²

A survey of people with brain tumours found that 13 per cent were severely or extremely stressed and 23 per cent were severely or extremely anxious.³ It's important to note that stress is not depression, however, acute distress can occur and may be a risk factor for depression if it persists.

Depression in people with a brain tumour may also be closely linked to emotional distress. Levels of depression may increase over time, especially if a person's quality of life is affected by ongoing symptoms, fear of relapse and the possible long-lasting side-effects of treatments.⁴ Depression is also more common in people if they have experienced depression in the past.

A problem in identifying depression in a person with a brain tumour is that the symptoms experienced may be due to the tumour, the treatment or depression. This is particularly true of both psychological symptoms (e.g. feeling sad, angry or guilty about being unwell) and physical symptoms (e.g. fatigue, changes in sleep/appetite, feeling generally slowed down). If a person is experiencing these symptoms, it is important to talk to a doctor, who will be able to assist in working out if he/she is depressed, so the person can receive the best possible treatment to relieve symptoms.

Several factors can greatly increase levels of stress and anxiety in a person with a brain tumour:

- The diagnosis of a brain tumour may cause emotions such as shock and disbelief, despair, anger and anxiety, helplessness, loss and worry about dying. These are all a normal part of adapting to this kind of major life event and the way people view themselves, their lives and their future. However, for some people, these feelings do not pass or ease with time and can lead to depression or anxiety.
- The physical effects of a brain tumour (e.g. restricted movement or functioning, seizures) can limit a person's independence (such as the ability to drive a car) and quality of life. This can result in difficulties socially, at work and in everyday life.
- The continuing strain associated with living with a brain tumour, and feelings of guilt about the strain placed on family members and others, together with the side-effects of treatment can further increase levels of stress and anxiety.



Illustration: Bettina Guthridge

² Pangilinan, PH, Kelly, BM, and Pangilinan, JM, 'Depression in the patient with brain cancer', *Community Oncology*, September 2007

³ Cancer Institute NSW (www.cancerinstitute.org.au)

⁴ Armstrong C, Goldstein B, Cohen B et al (2002) 'Clinical predictors of depression with low-grade brain tumours: consideration of a neurologic versus psychogenic model'. *J Clin Psych in Med Settings* 9(2): 97-107

WHAT IS DEPRESSION?

Depression is different from grief or sadness, which typically follows an experience of loss. Depression is a serious condition that can have severe effects on both *physical* and *mental* health. People with depression find it hard to function every day and may be reluctant or find it hard to participate in activities they once enjoyed.

Commonly, shock, sadness and anger can last for up to a month after the diagnosis of a brain tumour.⁵ Unless symptoms are very severe, doctors normally would not diagnose depression at this time. It is important to note, however, that people will work through the various emotions associated with being diagnosed with a brain tumour in their own time. Even after a person comes to terms with having a brain tumour, he/she is at increased risk of depression from the mental and physical effects of the tumour, side-effects of treatments, and from reduced quality of life.

Common behaviours, thoughts, feelings and physical symptoms associated with depression in a person with a brain tumour can include:

- being more tearful than usual
- withdrawing from family and friends
- no longer enjoying things he/she is still able to do
- being unable to concentrate on simple things, like watching TV
- relying on alcohol or other drugs to block out negative thoughts
- having thoughts such as “There’s no point any more” or “Life’s not worth living”
- feeling miserable for most of the time
- feeling emotionally distressed
- feeling guilty at being a burden to family members and friends, or feeling like a bad person
- feeling frustrated or indecisive
- feeling tired all the time
- difficulty falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much
- loss of appetite, or over-eating
- significant weight loss or gain.

Everyone experiences some or all of these symptoms from time to time, and many of them can be normal consequences of living with a brain tumour. However, when symptoms are severe and lasting, it’s time to seek professional help.

WHAT IS AN ANXIETY DISORDER?

Anxiety is a common emotion and in the event of a brain tumour diagnosis, some level of anxiety is certainly expected. But for some people, anxious feelings are overwhelming and cannot be brought under control easily. An anxiety disorder is a serious condition that makes it hard for the person to cope from day to day.

There are many types of anxiety disorders, each with a range of symptoms. A cancer diagnosis is one of many factors – such as a family history of mental health problems or experiencing a stressful life event – that may trigger anxiety.

People may be experiencing an anxiety disorder if, for some time, worry and fear have got in the way of other parts of their life – for example, in relationships or their ability to make decisions. An anxiety disorder will usually be far more intense than normal anxiety and go on for weeks, months or even longer.

An anxiety disorder can be expressed in different ways, such as uncontrollable worry, intense fear (phobias or panic attacks), or upsetting dreams or flashbacks of a traumatic event.

WHAT ARE THE TREATMENTS FOR DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY DISORDERS?

Different types of depression and anxiety disorders require different types of treatments. Possible treatments include psychological treatments for depression and anxiety or a combination of psychological and drug treatments for more severe levels of depression and anxiety. Support groups may also be helpful for people with a brain tumour, their families and carers.

If there is concern about behavioural changes and their effect on a person’s quality of life, it’s important to seek help as soon as possible. A doctor can help the person minimise the effects of the changes and decide whether treatment might be needed.

Psychological therapies may not only help with recovery from anxiety or depression, but can also help to prevent a recurrence of anxiety or depression. These psychological therapies can be given by a psychologist, psychiatrist or other trained health professional.

⁵ Satin JR, Linden W, Phillips MJ (2009) ‘Depression as a predictor of disease progression and mortality in cancer patients: a meta analysis’. *Cancer* 115(22):5349-61.



- **Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)** is one of the most researched psychological therapies and there is a lot of evidence to support its effectiveness in treating people with depression and anxiety disorders. It teaches people to evaluate their thinking about common difficulties, helping them to challenge unhelpful thought patterns and change the way they react to certain situations.
- **Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)** has also been researched and found to be effective for treatment of depression and some anxiety disorders. It helps people find new ways to get along with others and to resolve losses, changes and conflict in relationships.

Sometimes, people with brain tumours have difficulty with language – either in understanding or expressing. In such instances ‘talking therapies’ such as CBT and IPT may prove difficult. Depending on the side-effects caused by the brain tumour, the health professional should be able to tailor treatment to a person’s particular needs.

Antidepressant medication can also play a role in the treatment of moderate to severe depression and some anxiety disorders. No studies have yet examined the effectiveness of antidepressants specifically in people with brain tumours, but they have been found to be effective in the wider adult population. The doctor will make an overall judgment about the suitability of any treatment based on several factors – including the person’s clinical condition, other treatments the person is having, the effectiveness of any previous antidepressant treatment and the person’s own preferences.

Whatever a person’s symptoms and concerns are, it’s important to discuss these with the doctor, who will be able to evaluate them and provide a recommendation for treatment.

Finding a doctor

For a list of health professionals with expertise in treating depression, anxiety and related disorders, go to the *beyondblue* website www.beyondblue.org.au and click on Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner or call the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636** (local call cost from a landline).

For more information about treatments for depression and anxiety disorders, see *beyondblue*’s FREE booklets *A Guide to What Works for Depression* and *A Guide to What Works for Anxiety Disorders* (available at www.beyondblue.org.au or by calling the *beyondblue* info line **1300 22 4636**).

HOW TO GET THE RIGHT TREATMENT

- **Be proactive** – As with *physical* health problems, the earlier you get help for *mental* health problems, the faster you can recover. That’s why it’s important to get help at the first sign of any problems.
- **Be direct** – It’s vital to give your doctor or mental health professional the full picture. Writing down feelings or questions before your visit can help and makes it less likely you will forget to tell the doctor the important things. It may be useful to take a completed depression checklist along, such as the one on the *beyondblue* website www.beyondblue.org.au
- **Be patient** – Managing depression and anxiety is an important part of your overall treatment and recovery, even though it may mean fitting in visits to another health professional as well as the regular, often lengthy visits to specialists and hospitals for treatment and follow-up care for a brain tumour.
- **Be prepared to follow the treatment plan** – For some people, it can take a while before they feel mentally well again. It’s important that you stick with treatment plans and let the doctor know when things aren’t working or if you are experiencing side-effects.
- **Be persistent** – Finding the right mental health professional is very important. If you don’t feel comfortable with a doctor or other health professional, or feel your mental health isn’t being managed effectively, choose another health professional or get a second opinion.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

Coping with a brain tumour and treatments can be challenging enough, but if you experience mental health problems as well, it can be very difficult to work out how to manage – both emotionally and practically. Remember, you don't have to sort everything out at once. It may take some time to deal with each issue. Ask for help if you need it – your doctor or other health professional can refer you to a mental health professional who has special training or experience in supporting people with cancer. Remember, it's important to seek help early – the sooner the better.

The following tips may be helpful in managing depression and anxiety:

- Speak to your doctor about your concerns and discuss treatment options.
- Accept help, support and encouragement from family and friends.
- Avoid feeling isolated by becoming involved in social activities, if you are able.
- Talk to others who are going through a similar experience, such as in a peer support group.
- If your energy levels allow, take regular light exercise, such as walking (see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 8 – Keeping active**).
- Do activities that you enjoy or that help you to stay positive.
- Eat healthily and include a wide variety of nutritious foods in your diet (see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 30 – Healthy eating for people with depression, anxiety and related disorders**).
- Try to get enough sleep (see *beyondblue* **Fact Sheet 7 – Sleeping well**).
- Limit alcohol intake (see *beyondblue* **Fact Sheet 9 – Reducing alcohol and other drugs**).
- Allow yourself time to relax and reduce your stress (see *beyondblue* **Fact sheet 6 – Reducing stress**).

ADVICE FOR CARERS

When a person has a brain tumour and depression or an anxiety disorder, it can affect family members and friends. Carers may be at increased risk of depression, so it's important you look after your own health.

- Make sure you eat well, exercise regularly, get enough sleep and avoid alcohol and other drugs.
- Allow yourself time to relax and do what you enjoy. Plan activities like social outings and exercise.
- Look for symptoms of depression in yourself and seek help at the earliest sign.
- Seek support from professionals. This may involve having counselling or attending a carer support group.
- Find ways to ease the load, for example take Carer's Leave from work.
- Involve other family members and friends and accept offers of help.
- Acknowledge you are going through a difficult time and are likely to experience periods of grief.
- Remember that allowing others to help is not a sign of weakness – rather it is an act of generosity to allow them to show their concern and support for you.

For more information about caring for someone with depression and anxiety, see the FREE booklet, *beyondblue Guide for Carers – Caring for others, caring for yourself*, and the FREE *beyondblue* DVD – *Carers' Stories of Hope and Recovery*. Both can be ordered from www.beyondblue.org.au or by calling the *beyondblue* info line on **1300 22 4636**.

THINGS TO REMEMBER

- It's often a combination of factors that puts a person at risk of depression and anxiety disorders, but each person is different.
- Brain tumours increase the risk of depression and anxiety, particularly because they increase emotional stress and can affect usual daily functioning and quality of life.
- People who are well informed about their illness and treatment are more able to make decisions and cope with what happens.
- Be aware of the signs of depression and anxiety disorders and seek help if you think you may need it, as effective treatments are available.
- Act early to get help because depression and anxiety can have a negative effect on your *physical* and *mental* health.

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MORE INFORMATION

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

www.beyondblue.org.au or 1300 22 4636

Information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, available treatments and where to get help

Youthbeyondblue

www.youthbeyondblue.com

beyondblue's website for young people – information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

Lifeline

13 11 14

Counselling, information and referral

Carers Australia

1800 242 636 or www.carersaustralia.com.au

Information, referral and support for carers

Kids Helpline

1800 55 1800

Counselling for children and young people aged between five and 25

MensLine Australia

1300 78 99 78

Support for men and their families

Suicide Call Back Service

1300 659 467 or www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Telephone support and online resources for those at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide

Relationships Australia

1300 364 277 or www.relationships.com.au

Support and counselling focusing on personal and family relationships

Multicultural Mental Health Australia

(02) 9840 3333 or www.mmha.org.au

Mental health information for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

Brain Tumour Alliance Australia

www.btaa.org.au or 1800 857 221

Information for people newly diagnosed with brain tumours and their families

Cancer Institute NSW

www.cancerinstitute.org.au

Fact sheets on managing behavioural changes, as well as resource sheets including anger management, memory tips, goal-setting and problem solving (click on [Patients and Carers](#))

The International Brain Tumour Alliance

www.theibta.org

Alliance of the support, advocacy and information groups for brain tumour patients and carers around the world

The Cancer Council

www.cancer.org.au or 13 11 20

Information about cancer and where to go for support and help

Musella Foundation For Brain Tumor Research and Information

www.virtualtrials.com

Information for people newly diagnosed with brain tumours, including symptoms, treatments and survivor stories

Now What

www.nowwhat.org.au

Website from CanTeen providing information, support and an online forum for young people who have cancer, know someone close to them who has cancer or have had someone close to them die from cancer



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