

Emotional Health

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I have learned that finding out about being high risk lends itself to general anxiety, which will never completely disappear. I think once I accepted that and tried to find strategies to manage it things have improved. **Having a support group is also good to ensure you don't feel like you are the only one.** Feeling alone in my battle has been the biggest cause of anxiety for me personally. Even though there are friends and family supporting me it is ultimately a battle I will have to take alone. ”

The journey for women at high risk of familial cancer is often an emotional one. For many of us, it begins with one or more family members who have been affected by cancer, which is hard on its own. Making decisions about genetic testing and personal preventive measures like surgery makes this time even more stressful and can affect our mental health. Mental health is a vital component of overall wellbeing, and it's important to take the time to deal with those emotions.

Anxiety and depression are some of the common mental health issues that may arise. **In fact, 1 in 5 women in Australia will experience depression and 1 in 3 women will experience anxiety during their lifetime.**

What is Anxiety?

According to **Beyond Blue**, anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. Stress and anxious feelings are a common response to high-pressure situations, but it usually passes once the stressor is removed or the events have passed. Anxiety is when these feelings don't subside - they are ongoing and exist without any particular reason or cause. We all feel anxious from time to time, but for a person experiencing anxiety, these feelings cannot be easily controlled, and can be present for weeks to months.

Symptoms may include:

- Obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviour.
- Increasing worry.
- Feeling there are knots in the stomach.
- Tension headaches.
- Hands trembling.
- Hot and cold flushes.
- Racing heart.
- Tightening of the chest.
- Ongoing trouble sleeping and tiredness.
- Ongoing feelings of restlessness and/or irritability.

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From Pink Hope Members

“When thoughts of ovarian cancer started to dominate my thinking more and more, I became less able to relax and unwind.”

“I am more irritable than usual and my moods are very up and down. I sometimes have panic all of a sudden and feel like I just want to stay home and not be around anyone.”

“I would wake up with a pain in my chest and think ‘that might be breast cancer.’”

“When I was first diagnosed with BRCA1 I definitely felt extremely anxious and depressed for a couple of months.”

“I have suffered from anxiety. For me it was stomach knots, nausea, having a very short fuse often leading to explosive fights with friends and family. I would also wake up in the early hours of the morning in a panic. I became obsessed with changing my fitness and diet, constantly looking up cancer preventing foods.”

What is Depression?

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings **intensely, for long periods of time** (weeks, months or even years) and sometimes without any apparent reason. Symptoms may include:

- Not going out anymore, withdrawing from family and friends.
- Increase in substance misuse.
- Not doing usual enjoyable activities.
- Inability to concentrate.
- Social withdrawal.

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- Feeling overwhelmed, irritable, and/or and frustrated.
- Feeling persistently low in mood, unhappy, miserable, angry or irritable.
- Thoughts like, 'I'm a failure,' 'I'm worthless,' or 'Life's not worth living.'
- Feeling tired and run down all the time.
- Sleep problems.
- Loss or change of appetite.
- Significant weight loss or gain.
- Thoughts of self harm or suicide.



From Pink Hope Members

“Sometimes I really didn't want to interact with my inner circle (text, phone calls, emails etc) and would crave alone time and just want to shut out the world.”

“My sleeping became affected and once awake...thought intrusion again stopped me getting back to sleep”

“The smallest thing would make me cry or fall apart.”

“I was having some troubles focusing at work and it was affecting my performance. I was also drinking a lot of alcohol, often not for any special occasions.”

Keep in mind that it doesn't necessarily mean you have anxiety or depression if you experience one or two of these symptoms occasionally. It becomes a problem when **the symptoms are ongoing** and start to affect other areas of life, like relationships with family or colleagues.

For those who have experienced mental health struggles in the past, you can learn to identify personal **warning signs** by reflecting on which symptoms you've experienced in order to recognize potential future episodes.

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What Can I Do?

Every person needs to find the treatment that's right for them. There are many options, from simply speaking to a friend or counsellor, to taking medication or trying alternative therapies like hypnosis.

For Pink Hope members, you can make use of the **online closed Facebook groups** by posting questions or discussing frustrations with other high risk women. If you'd prefer to talk to just one person, **simply post and ask if anyone would be willing to speak with you via direct messaging.** I strongly believe that other women who are also at high risk are our best resource. It can help reduce feelings of loneliness or feeling like you have no one to talk to that understands the high risk journey.

If you prefer to speak to someone anonymously, there are many ways to talk to someone via phone or e-mail/chat. **Call Lifeline on their 24 hours Telephone Crisis support** (13 11 14) or check their website to communicate through e-mail.

See your GP or high-risk specialist for a referral to a psychologist, mental health counsellor, or psychiatrist. Seeing someone who specialises in mental health is the first step; he or she can discuss different treatment options and/or continuing counselling sessions.

One thing that we can all do is try to prevent these feelings from happening by adopting some simple tips in order to maintain good mental health:

- **Reduce stress.** If you are going through a stressful time like caring for ill family members or undergoing preventive surgeries, avoid other life stressors at the same time. For example, put off moving house or starting a new job if possible.
- **Ongoing stress in personal relationships often contributes to depression** and anxiety. Learn how to let people know about your feelings so that you can resolve personal conflicts as they come up. Surround yourself with supportive people.
- Allocate time **to do the things you enjoy**, such as exercising, meditating, reading, gardening or listening to music.

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- **Learn to say 'no'.** Create a balance between work and the things you enjoy doing. Don't allow yourself to be overwhelmed by new commitments.
- Include **short-term coping strategies** in your day, such as breathing and relaxation exercises.
- Keep in mind that **alcohol is a depressant and may worsen depressive feelings.** Try to minimize alcohol to 1 drink per day for women.
- Regular **physical exercise has been shown to reduce depression.** Even if it is just taking a walk with a friend, keep active. Make it enjoyable – take a class, garden, bike ride with friends or kids. Mental and physical health go hand-in-hand; you'll feel good physically, which increases mood.
- **Adopt good sleeping patterns.** Aim for 7-8 hours per night, or whatever you find is best for you. Avoid using electronics before bed as the light can prevent sleep.

If I am Concerned About my Mental Health, What Now?

Health Professionals Who Can Help

If you have concerns about your emotional wellbeing, taking the steps to get help can feel overwhelming. This resource outlines the different health professionals available and what they can do.

- **General Practitioner:** Your GP is a great first contact. He or she can make a diagnosis and/or discuss referrals to specialists as well as prescribe medication. If your GP completes a Mental Health Treatment Plan, you can even get Medicare rebates for psychological treatment. Choose “General Practitioner” in Beyond Blue’s “Find a Professional” tool below to find a GP that specialises in treating common mental health issues.

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- **Psychologist:** Clinical psychologists have specialist training in the assessment, diagnosis, treatment and prevention of a wide range of mental health issues. They are qualified to provide a range of techniques and therapies in individually tailored interventions. You don't need a referral, but in order to claim a Medicare rebate you will need your GP to complete a **Mental Health Treatment Plan**. If you have private health insurance and extras cover, you may be able to claim part of a psychologist's fee. You can search for a psychologist based on location and expertise on the Australian Psychological Society website. LINK: <https://www.psychology.org.au/>.
- **Psychiatrist:** A psychiatrist is a qualified medical doctor who can prescribe medication, provide psychological therapies (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy and family therapy), and organise support services and assistance for individuals and their families. A referral from a GP is needed to see a psychiatrist. Rebates can also be claimed through Medicare. You can search for a psychiatrist according to expertise and location on **The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists**. LINK: <https://www.ranzcp.org>.
- **Counsellor:** A counsellor is a trained professional who can help you work out your personal problems through talk-based therapy. They can work in a variety of settings, including youth services, private practices, community health centres, schools and universities. Counselling is usually a short-term treatment for a specific problem. Unfortunately, anyone can call themselves a 'counsellor', even if they don't have training or experience. For this reason, **it is important to ask for information about the counsellor's qualifications and whether they are registered with a state board or a professional society**. A good counsellor will be happy to provide you with this information.
- **Beyond Blue's "Find A Professional" Tool.**
LINK: <http://www.beyondblue.org.au/get-support/find-a-professional>

People living in rural and remote communities may find it difficult to access health care. **If a General Practitioner or other mental health professional is not readily available, there are a number of help and information lines available through Beyond Blue** that may be able to assist and provide information or advice. For people with internet access, it may be beneficial in some cases to try online e-therapies. **Medicare** covers telehealth consultations and your General Practitioner can provide more information on this service.