

Your Mental Health After Transplant

It is common to experience a number of intense emotions during a transplant. These emotions can also be a side effect of some of your medications.

Emotions you may experience include:

- Intense, persistent sadness that you can't seem to shake off
 - Feeling as if you have a short fuse and things that normally wouldn't have bothered you now set you off.
 - Loss of interest in things & activities that normally bring you joy. Or you are interested, but they don't seem to make you as happy as before.
 - Unusually low or high appetite. Perhaps you've lost or gained weight as a result. Or you're eating more or less meals than the usual.
 - Sleeping more or less than your usual.
 - Feeling slowed down that is not explained by your physical condition. Others may be telling you that you appear "slow" to them.
 - Poor memory and concentration, such as having difficulty remembering things or feeling scatter-brained. For example, you may find it hard to focus on a book, task, or a conversation.
 - Intense feeling of worthlessness or guilt. You may feel that your illness is entirely your fault and that you are causing extreme pain/burden to others around you. Particularly, you may feel that you are not worthy of transplant or suffer from crushing guilt that you took away someone else's life.
 - Thoughts that life is not worth living, life would be easier if you were no longer alive, or that others would be better off without you.
- These symptoms may interfere with your ability or motivation to adhere to your post-transplant regimen of medications, self-monitoring, exercise, and clinic appointments.



Individuals with a history of anxiety symptoms often experience an increase of symptoms after transplant.

After surgery, patients and families are anxious as to whether the new organ will take and function, whether they will experience complications, medication side effects or graft rejection, and whether they will actually have an improved quality of life.

Often, before surgery patients have difficulty accepting or imagining the rigors and stressors they will face after transplant. These issues become reality immediately when they are called in for surgery and during the period surrounding transplantation.

Excessive or irrational fears due to anxiety may even cause you to avoid tests, treatments, hospitals, or interfere with your medication taking. It is normal to be anxious under these circumstances. It is concerning when it is excessive and impairing.

Anxiety symptoms may increase with:

- The stress of the ICU stay
- Medical complications
- Sleep deprivation
- Post-operative complications
- Graft rejection and/or medication side effects



Delirium

Around the time of transplant, particularly after surgery, you may experience a phenomenon common in acutely ill patients in hospital called “delirium.” Delirium refers to a group of symptoms that are defined by sudden change in your alertness and attention. For example, you may find that you are having a hard time staying awake, easily distracted, and/or confused about your surroundings. Delirium can also cause someone to be paranoid, appear depressed and/or anxious, or agitated. Delirium improves as your medical condition improves.

Cognitive Impairment

In addition, cognitive impairment (or a change in the way your brain works and you think) can be experienced by many transplant patients around the time of transplantation, particularly immediately after transplant surgery. For example, you may notice that your ability to form and recall memories are reduced.

Dealing with Emotions

It may be helpful to share your feelings with your spouse, a friend, or someone in your faith community. Open discussion of feelings will help you and your family understand how you feel. Supportive counseling may also be an option if you still don't feel quite right during your recovery.

Family Adjustment

This may be a stressful time for your whole family. Roles may have changed during the transplant period. Switching from being independent to a care -receiver may be a challenging emotional transition. It is important that you allow yourself to receive and ask for help when needed. Reversing back to your previous roles after recovery may also be a difficult transition.

Families feel better and cope better when they discuss each member's feelings about the transplant and plans for the future.

Young children may be overlooked in this process- whether they are your children or grandchildren. It is important to discuss their feelings and fears as well.

If you are struggled with any of the above, family therapy may be an option to help you and your loved ones through this period.



Breathe Your Way to Calm

When stress and anxiety have you spinning, a simple breathing exercise may help you feel grounded again. Short and shallow breathing raises anxiety. Deep breathing from the belly helps us to feel calm. Here's how the exercise goes:

- Sit with a straight back, and exhale through your mouth.
- Close your mouth and quietly inhale through your nose for a count of four.
- Hold your breath for as long as comfortable.
- Slowly exhale through your mouth for a count of eight.

You can repeat these simple steps three or four times to decrease panicky, out-of-control feelings. Controlling your breathing sends a calming message to your autonomic nervous system – the part of your body responsible for the relaxation response.

Take a breath



If you are experiencing a mental health crisis and need immediate assistance call the URM C 24/7 crisis hotline number: **585-275-8686**