

Impact of breast cancer on mental health

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[Breast cancer](#) affects many South African women being the most common among women in the country. The Cancer Association of South Africa ([Cansa](#)) says, there is help and support available.



Coping with a cancer diagnosis

Gretchen Minnaar, Cansa's services manager: Psychosocial Support, explains: "Getting a cancer diagnosis is tough. It's not just about the body; it's about the mind too. It affects you and your family's [mental health](#). Although breast cancer doesn't directly cause depression, it can affect your emotions as you deal with diagnosis and treatments. Some might experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with up to 32% of breast cancer patients showing signs of it."

#BreastCancerAwareness #MentalHealthAwarenessMonth

"Chemotherapy may bring sudden personality changes, often called 'chemo rage', linked to steroids used in treatment or chemo brain resulting in diminished capacity to concentrate and remember things, making it hard to continue with work or everyday life. The loss of a breast or complications from surgery, for example lymphoedema, can be debilitating and affect your self-image. If your worry becomes too much or you are experiencing mood swings, it's important to seek emotional support. We offer free psychosocial support," she added.

Prioritising mental well-being can make the breast cancer journey more manageable. Cansa understands this and offers [counselling services](#) and [support groups](#) to support cancer survivors and caregivers emotionally. There are waiting periods to get appointments for a psychologist in the public system, so Cansa has qualified social workers that can assist with counselling through its [Tele Counselling](#) line. To date, 78% of women benefit from this free service to help them cope which is available in seven languages (English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa, isiZulu, siSwati, Sesotho and Setswana).

"We operate six online (WhatsApp) support groups nationally which also includes support for metastatic breast cancer patients. Patients may benefit from both individual and group therapy sessions. For group sessions to be effective, studies show that women should be with other women at a similar or same stage in treatment. This allows women the opportunity to receive and give support emotionally and learn from other experiences. Regardless of individual or group psychological

interventions, all are aimed to help women adjust to their diagnosis, cope with their treatment, and come to terms with the impact cancer has had on their life,” shares Minnaar.

Cansa further suggests taking care of your mental health with simple steps: Connect with nature by spending time outdoors or listening to nature sounds online; [write down](#) feelings or journaling can ease stress and sadness; try different methods of meditation and discuss appropriate physical movement with your medical team to find what works and don't hesitate to ask the care team for referrals to mental health experts.

Navigating the healthcare system

Dealing with cancer means dealing with a lot of paperwork and processes, especially if a person is relying on public healthcare. But even if someone has health insurance or a medical aid, there are still important systems to understand. Patients should get to know and understand oncology benefits from a service provider (even if it's a basic hospital plan) and [your rights](#) as a patient.

The power of screening

According to Minnaar: “Screening is essential, especially for women. It helps catch cancer early when it's easier to treat. We know that early detection is key to enabling effective treatment and a better chance of recovering from cancer. It's also important to know what screening options are available to you, especially if you have a family history of cancer.”

- **Clinical breast examinations** – It's a check to detect any signs of breast cancer early. Cansa offers affordable clinical breast examinations at Cansa Care Centres to detect any irregularities. Patients with medical aid benefits can claim from their medical aids once they have paid for the screening. Government health clinics also offer free clinical breast examination.
- **Mammograms** – Mammograms are like super-detailed breast pictures. Women can be screened at public hospital breast clinics if they have a referral letter from a medical professional or Cansa nurse. Alternately contact the Radiological Society of SA (RSSA) www.rssa.co.za to arrange for a mammogram.
- **Breast self-examination** – Check your breasts regularly. Cansa's website has information on [how to do it](#). Look out for signs like lumps or changes in the breast's shape, and get to know the warning signs.

Cansa hosts events in October to raise funds to support its [women's health](#) educational campaign and help keep screening affordable. Purchase a 'Doek with a Difference' or a pair of earrings or wrap a tree as part of the [Pink Trees for Pauline](#) campaign – available at local Cansa Care Centres. Host or attend a [Cuppa For Cansa](#) event or Cansa High Teas – contact info@Cansa.org.za or [donate](#) via Cansa's secure online platforms www.Cansa.org.za.

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