

Scanxiety: Understanding, Managing & Thriving Beyond the Fear

Positive thinking is not just an attitude, but a discipline that requires consistent effort and continuous learning over time.

April 11, 2025 By [Melanoma Research Alliance](#)

Undergoing medical scans can be an incredibly stressful experience for patients and their loved ones. The anxiety surrounding these procedures, referred to as “scan anxiety,” or more often “scanxiety,” encompasses a range of worries and fears about the scanning process itself as well as the potential results and what they might mean for one’s health. This overwhelming sense of distress can manifest in various ways, both physical and psychological, impacting a person before, during, and after scans. By shedding light on this phenomenon from a patient’s perspective, J.B. Ward, a psychologist and melanoma survivor herself, delved into the multifaceted nature of scanxiety, offering insights into its triggers, coping strategies, and the importance of self-compassion and open communication in navigating this challenging experience.

Coping with “Scanxiety”: A Patient’s Perspective

“Some people describe it as a physical feeling of distress that can occur before, during, and after a scan,” said Dr. Ward. A recent study looked at all the different parts of scanxiety to better understand it and found that worries about the actual scan procedures themselves, such as unfamiliar equipment, claustrophobia, physical discomfort, and radiation exposure, are common. However, concerns about the scan results and what they might mean often loom larger, according to Dr. Ward: “It’s more about the results themselves, and the uncertainty and change that might come as a result of the findings.”

Importantly, it’s not just the patient who experiences scanxiety. As Dr. Ward pointed out, “It’s also caregivers, or really anybody in your life ... my family members experienced it.” Just the act of waiting and wondering can cause loved ones to feel anxious, too. Scanxiety can happen at any point — weeks or even a month before the scan, the day of, during the procedure itself, or even after getting the results. And it feels different for everyone.

It’s “not just fear” but can involve physical symptoms such as increases in heart rate, psychological distress like nervousness, and racing thoughts. The important thing is recognizing your own personal experiences with scanxiety.

Tips and Tools to Manage Scanxiety

Dr. Ward highlighted that scanxiety is a valid experience that shouldn't be dismissed. "Self-compassion" in accepting these feelings as normal is key: "Until you actually feel and allow yourself to have compassion for yourself and others, it can be very challenging to improve your experience."

Reflecting on your own personal triggers and timing of anxiety can also help. "If you take a moment to self-reflect and ask questions about what is particularly challenging for you, you may be able to use that to help inform a plan," she advised. Quoting Dr. Leslie Waltke, oncology physical therapist and creator of patient resource the Recovery Room, Dr. Ward explained that the goal is to "make it suck less" through compassionate self-awareness and proactive coping.

Self-advocacy involves putting self-compassion into practice by taking steps to make positive changes for yourself, which can be extremely difficult, even though we often advocate for others. Dr. Ward shared that we're good at helping others but doing things for ourselves can be really tough—even when those things would improve our well-being. Letting yourself take steps to make positive changes for your own sake may require overcoming major obstacles.

Strategies for Managing Scanxiety

Information about how to manage scanxiety is limited. However, from the available research, several themes emerge. Using multiple approaches like distraction and education may be more effective than one technique alone.

"Self-advocacy involves actively managing your thoughts and finding what works best for you when dealing with medical issues. Writing things down can help get thoughts out and prepare for appointments." Others find personal rituals or superstitions comforting, Dr. Ward said, "At a certain point, my husband was not allowed to come to my appointments anymore. My sister came, and ever since then, things were great." Some patients prefer to access any test results in advance, using their electronic medical record before going to the doctor's office, "so that they have time to process and come up with questions." But others need to be right there in the room with their provider when they get those results, or else their panic is at an all-time high. "The key is knowing yourself and what works for you when advocating for your needs."

Reinforcing social support, although difficult, can be beneficial: "Support comes from kind words ... or people offering to help around the house." And "these people may also be experiencing [your] same scanxiety." Self-reflection about physical changes, worries, and fears is important, too. Dr. Ward suggested that digging into and identifying these difficult feelings can help produce a plan, although the process can be tough.

Dr. Ward shared Dr. Leslie Waltke's YouTube channel resource called "Recovery Room," and a video called "Coping with Scanxiety." The resource highlights "having a before-scan plan" to

prepare physically, mentally, and socially, such as “scheduling lunch with your friend” or “a relaxing massage.” Then have “a distraction plan” right before the scan that includes things like “taking someone with you in the waiting room, walking the halls, using music and videos.” Finally, create a post-scan plan by asking the medical team how you will be getting your results and potentially making changes to it, such as walking over to a different room and picking up the results early. As Dr. Ward stated, the key is “making the plan around actually obtaining the results and knowing [the plan] ... so that you can advocate for something that would work best for you.”

Visualization can also be a helpful technique during medical scans or moments of intense anxiety. If you feel out of control in those situations, visualizing a particular scenario or outcome can provide a sense of control. Engaging the mind through visualization allows you to direct your thoughts in a positive way during the scan or when anxiety spikes.

Positive thinking is not just an attitude, but a discipline that requires consistent effort and continuous learning over time. It involves “work” and is an “active” process of diligently training your mindset, rather than just trying to passively adopt a positive attitude.

For some people, combining a mantra with spirituality can be beneficial. Mantras, which involve mentally repeating a phrase or thought, can be very helpful when experiencing recurring thoughts or anxiety. The practice of using a spiritual mantra works well in various situations and settings.

Communication with Friends and Family

Communication and planning on how to share information with family and friends are important for managing scanxiety. As Dr. Ward shared, “We had to come up with a game plan because people were texting me ... and it was actually upsetting to me when I was getting these texts while I was actively working to distract myself.” Having an open conversation helped everyone understand her needs and that she would let family know the specific day and time that she would get the results and then call them afterwards. “Just having that understanding of when and what the results are going to be like, and how those will be communicated was helpful for everybody.”

When to Seek Help

It’s important to know when to seek help from a professional or counseling support group. Dr. Ward recommended getting assistance “if you notice that scans are getting in the way of your life” or “if you’re having a hard time coming up with a plan to deal with it.” Help should also be sought “if you’re making decisions that might not be recommended for you to do based on your medical care” or “if you’re having concerns about the procedure itself that are problematic.” Many clinics have people on staff who can help with scanxiety. “Large medical centers will have easy referrals to professionals that they know who can help with these things.” Dr. Ward suggested a few online resources such as [Findhelp](#) and [CancerCare](#). Another option is to check your health plan for mental health providers that are in-network. Local cancer organizations often have resources as well. “It’s great to have someone else to talk to and to help come up with an individual plan to manage

scanxiety,” concluded Dr. Ward.

This blog was published by [Melanoma Research Alliance](#) on March 18, 2025. It is republished with permission.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.

<http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/scanxiety-understanding-managing-thriving-beyond-fear>