

Emotional Support in Survivorship

Cancer treatment affects your physical and emotional health. Many people experience mixed feelings and unexpected emotions as they complete their treatment and enter survivorship. You may feel relieved and worried at the same time. This handout explores common emotions cancer survivors experience and provides support resources.



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Fear of Recurrence

In the first year after treatment, fear of *recurrence* (cancer coming back) is one of the most common concerns that cancer survivors have. Many survivors report that the fear of recurrence fades over time, and they think less often about cancer.

Events may bring up fears for years after your treatment. These fears may come up before healthcare appointments, or when your family and friends are ill.

What are the signs that fear might be becoming a problem?

- Feeling overwhelmed by fear.
- Fear that gets in the way of your daily activities. You might have trouble concentrating at school or work.
- Feeling worried about cancer before you go to sleep and first thing in the morning.
- Feeling very worried about cancer coming back when you have headache, coughs, or minor aches.
- Delaying or missing healthcare visits to avoid feeling afraid.

What can help you control fear?

Learning How to Cope: Practicing meditation, yoga, or mindfulness skills can help you improve your emotional and physical well-being. These strategies can help decrease persistent fear of cancer coming back. Some strategies you can try are:

- Art therapy. This can include writing, painting, dancing, or music.
- Relaxation practices. Try different ways to relax your body, including deep breathing, massage, aromatherapy, or visualization.
- Meditation. This can include mindfulness meditation or moving meditation such as yoga or tai chi.
- Cognitive-behavioral skills. Learning to recognize fear and think about it differently can help you feel more comfortable with uncertainty.

Ask for Professional Help: If your fear of recurrence does not get better after you try different coping strategies, ask for help. Your healthcare provider can connect you with a mental health professional.

Depression & Anxiety

While most people feel better after cancer treatment, many people continue to feel sad, angry, or tense. The National Cancer Institute found that up to 25% of cancer patients develop depression. This is 2 to 3 times higher than the general population. It is also normal for people to feel anxious sometimes in their day-to-day lives, especially in new situations. Transitioning to life after cancer treatment is an example of a new situation that can increase anxiety.

Over time, most cancer survivors start to feel better. If your feelings of depression or anxiety do not go away, it is important to ask your healthcare provider for help.

What are the signs of depression and anxiety?

Tell your healthcare provider if you have:

- Feelings of dread or fear that last for several days.
- Feelings that make it difficult to take care of yourself.
- Thoughts about hurting yourself.
- Sad feelings most of the time, for several days.
- Loss of appetite, changes in sleep, lack of energy, or having a tough time focusing.
- Upset stomach, sweaty palms, fast heartbeat, shaking, or flushed face.

What can help with depression and anxiety?

Learn How to Cope:

- Exercise regularly. Even a short daily walk can help.
- Let yourself feel sad sometimes. You don't have to be cheerful all the time.
- Talk to someone close to you about your fears and concerns. This can help you feel less alone.
- Think about how you have coped with difficult situations in the past. This may give you ideas about managing your emotions.
- Write down positive things that happen each day.
- Express your feelings in painting, writing, or music.

Ask for Professional Help: If your anxiety and/or depression does not improve even when you try different coping strategies, ask for help. Your healthcare provider can connect you with a mental health professional. It is OK to ask for help.

If you feel you are in crisis, call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at 988 or 911. The Lifeline provides free and confidential support for people in distress 24/7.

Loneliness

Feeling alone after treatment is common. It is easy to feel isolated from some people who may not understand what you have been through. This can affect your relationships. You might miss the support from your healthcare team since you will not see them as much as before. If you are feeling alone, there are support options that can help you cope.

What can help with loneliness?

- Joining support groups is a great way to connect with people who have had similar experiences. You can also support other people who are in treatment and help them on their journey.
- Find a mental health professional who can help you navigate your emotions. They can help you find ways to manage your feelings.

Anger

You may feel angry during and after treatment. You may be angry about how cancer has affected your life. You may also feel angry or resentful toward people who were unsupportive. If you feel angry, you do not have to hide your anger or pretend everything is okay. Instead, find ways to express and process your anger.

What can help with anger?

- Find out what is causing your anger. Ask yourself, “where is this anger coming from?” Finding the source of your frustration might help you better understand and address it.
- Feeling in control of your day-to-day life can be helpful. Try cooking for yourself, trying a new hobby, or meditating. By making small changes, you might start to feel less angry.
- Exercising is an effective way to release anger and calm your mind.
- Find a mental health professional to help you learn to cope with your anger.

Where to Find Help

Counseling: Counselors or therapists offer one-on-one or family counseling. They can help you cope with complex issues like a serious illness. They can also help you when other strategies and supports have not met your needs. Many survivors try counseling, since it is helpful to talk with a professional about the complex emotions that come up after treatment. If you think counseling would be helpful, please see a list of local options below.

- **Mindful Therapy Group:** 425.640.7009, www.mindfultherapygroup.com
- **Seattle Psychology:** 206.420.4701, www.seattlepsychology.com
- **Bluestone Psychological Services:** 425.775.4059, www.bluestoneps.com
- **LifeStance Health:** www.lifestance.com
- **Evidence Based Treatment Center of Seattle:** 206.374.0109, www.ebtseattle.com
- **Seattle Mindfulness Center:** www.seattlemindfulnesscenter.com/psychotherapy
- **Cascades Wellness Center:** 206.594.0577, www.cascadeswellness.com

Resources for patients with private insurance: Below is a list of clinics that offer in-person and/or telehealth options. You can also visit Psychology Today and narrow down the search by insurance, zip code, and other preferences. www.psychologytoday.com

- **Sound Health:** 206.901.2000, www.sound.health
- **Navos:** 206.248.8226, www.navos.org
- **Valley Cities:** 253.833.7444, www.valleycities.org
- **Psychology Today:** www.psychologytoday.com. You can narrow down the search by choosing Medicaid, Molina (Apple Health)

We recommend that you contact your insurance company to confirm a therapist you would like to work with is in your network and to find out what your co-pay will be.

Resources for patients with Medicaid: Below is a list of clinics that offer in-person and/or telehealth options.

Support Groups: A support group is a way to meet people who have gone through similar cancer experiences. It offers a safe place for you to talk about your feelings, share information, and learn to cope with cancer-related challenges.

- **Cancer Survivor Network:** Offers peer support communities for patients, survivors, caregivers, families, and friends. To find a group, visit www.csn.cancer.org
- **CancerCare:** Offers support groups for patients and caregivers. All groups have start and end dates. To attend a group, you must register. Visit www.cancercare.org/support_groups
- **Cancer Lifeline:** Offers a variety of support groups, classes, and programs. Visit their website to see current courses and learn how to register. www.cancerlifeline.org
- **Cancer Pathways:** Offers support groups, classes, and social work support. Visit their website to learn more about their programs and resources. www.cancerpathways.org
- **Harmony Hill:** Harmony Hill offers 3-day cancer retreats at no cost to participants and caregivers impacted by cancer. Retreats help facilitate healing and connection with others. To find more information, visit www.harmonyhill.org

Peer Support Mentoring Programs: Peer programs offer support for patients and caregivers from someone who has been on a similar journey. This support is provided online or over the phone.

- Imerman Angels: www.imermanangels.org/get-support
- 4th Angel Mentoring Program: www.4thangel.org
- Peer Counseling for Medicaid: Peer Support and Counseling

Please speak to your primary care provider if you would like to discuss these resources further.

If you are in crisis, please call 988 or 911.

Questions?
Your questions are important. Please contact your primary care provider who can help answer your questions or concerns.