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## Life After Cancer

When cancer treatment ends, people begin a new chapter in their lives, one that can bring hope and happiness, but also worries and fear. No two people are alike. Each person has his or her own way of coping and learning to manage these emotions. It will take time and practice.

You'll probably be concerned that the cancer might come back, and you might find yourself thinking about death and dying. The fear of cancer coming back (called [cancer recurrence](#)<sup>1</sup>) is common among cancer survivors and can sometimes be quite intense.

Maybe you're more aware of the effects the cancer has had on your family, friends, and career. You may take a new look at your relationships with those around you.

Unexpected issues might also cause concern. For instance, you might be stressed by financial concerns resulting from your treatment. You might also see your health care team less often after treatment and have more time on your hands. Any of these things might make you anxious.

Some people are better prepared for life after cancer than others. But everyone can benefit from help and support from other people, whether friends and family, religious groups, support groups, professional counselors, or others.

### **Going back to "normal"**

You've been seeing your cancer care team quite often; now, suddenly, you don't have to visit for many months at a time. When treatment is done, some people feel like they're no longer fighting the cancer. Worries can set in. You might feel alone and lost without the support of your cancer care team. These people may have become an important part of your life. Not seeing them might make you anxious and sad.

You may also find that going back to your role in the family is not as easy as you thought it would be. Things that you did before your cancer are now being done by others. Maybe they're not willing to give your tasks back to you. Or maybe you disagree with how others have done things, but are afraid to say anything.

For some people, emotions that were put aside during cancer treatment come flooding back all at once, and they feel overwhelmed with sadness, anger, or fear. Some of it may be the lingering side effects of treatment, but some of it feels as if your body and spirit are tired and need a long rest. It's been a long time since you could just relax.

All of these feelings make sense. You've just been through a difficult time. You've had to make some major life decisions. Your body has been assaulted by cancer and its treatment. Your outlook and your whole way of life have changed, at least for a time.

Facing these feelings and learning how to deal with them is important. Don't expect everything to go back to the way it was before you were diagnosed. Give yourself, your family, and those around you time... you'll get through this. Just like it took time to adjust to cancer, you can adjust to life after cancer.

### ***Staying positive***

In recent years, much attention has been paid to the importance of having a positive attitude. Some people go so far as to suggest that such an attitude will stop the cancer from growing or keep it from coming back. Please do not allow others' misguided attempts to encourage positive thinking place this burden on you.

You might be better able to manage your life and cancer history when you're able to look at things in a positive light, but that's not always possible. It's good to work toward having a positive attitude, which can help you feel better about life now. Just remember you don't have to act "positive" all the time. Don't beat yourself up or let others make you feel guilty when you're feeling sad, angry, anxious, or distressed.

Cancer is not caused by a person's negative attitude nor is it made worse by a person's thoughts. Don't let the positive attitude myths stop you from telling your loved ones or your cancer care team how you feel.

### **Learning to live with uncertainty**

You may notice that you're paying a lot of attention to aches and pains in your body. You may feel like a "sitting duck." The doctor says you have no signs of cancer now, but can you be sure? You may be wondering...

- Will it come back?
- What are the chances it will come back?
- How will I know if it has come back?
- What will I do if it comes back?
- When will it come back?

The fear grips you, and you have trouble sleeping, being close with your partner, and even making simple decisions. You are not alone.

As time goes by, many people say that their fear of cancer returning (recurrence) decreases and they find themselves thinking less and less often about cancer. But even years after treatment, certain events may stir up this worry again, for instance:

- Follow-up visits or certain medical tests
- Anniversary events (like the date you were diagnosed, had surgery, or ended treatment)
- Birthdays
- Illness of a family member
- Learning that someone you know has cancer or has had a recurrence
- Having symptoms that are a lot like the ones you had when you first found you had cancer
- New symptoms you don't understand
- The death of someone who had cancer

Here are some ideas that have helped others deal with uncertainty and fear and feel more hopeful:

- Be informed. Learn what you can do for your health now and about the services available to you. This can give you a greater sense of control.
- Be aware that you don't have control over cancer recurrence. It helps to accept this rather than fight it.
- Be aware of your fears, but don't judge them. Practice letting them go. It's normal for these thoughts to enter your mind, but you don't have to keep them there. Some people picture them floating away, or being vaporized. Others turn them over to a higher power to handle. However you do it, letting them go can free you from wasting time and energy on needless worry.
- Express your feelings of fear or uncertainty with a trusted friend or counselor. Being open and dealing with emotions helps many people feel less worried. People have

found that when they express strong feelings, like fear, they're better able to let go of these feelings. Thinking and talking about your feelings can be hard. But if you find cancer is taking over your life, it often helps to find a way to express your feelings.

- Take in the present moment rather than thinking of an uncertain future or a difficult past. If you can find a way to feel peaceful inside yourself, even for a few minutes a day, you can start to recall that peace when other things are happening – when life is busy and confusing.
- Use your energy to focus on wellness and what you can do now to stay as healthy as possible. Try to make healthy diet changes. If you are a smoker, this is a good time to quit.
- Find ways to help yourself relax.
- Be as physically active as you can.
- Control what you can. Some people say that putting their lives back in order makes them feel less fearful. Being involved in your health care, getting back to your normal life, and making changes in your lifestyle are among the things you can control. Even setting a daily schedule can give you more power. And while no one can control every thought, some say they've resolved not to dwell on the fearful ones.

If you're worried about a recurrence, see [Can I Do Anything to Prevent Cancer Recurrence?](#)<sup>2</sup>

### **Health problems from cancer treatment**

Some cancer treatments may cause health problems later on. These may be called long-term side effects. These problems might not appear right away and some don't show up until years after treatment. Ask your cancer care team:

- If the treatments you had put you at risk for short- or long-term health problems
- What those problems are and how you can recognize them
- What you should do if you notice them
- What you can do to be as healthy as you can

Still, don't hesitate to ask any questions you have and find out what you need to know about possible problems related to your cancer treatment.

### **Get support**

Emotional support can be a powerful tool for both cancer survivors and their families. Talking with others who are in situations like yours can help ease loneliness. You can also get useful ideas from others that might help you.

There are many kinds of support programs, including individual or group counseling and support groups.

Support in any form allows you to express your feelings and develop coping skills. Studies have found that people who take part in support groups have an improved quality of life, including better sleep and appetite. Contact your American Cancer Society to find out about available [sources of support where you live](#)<sup>3</sup>.

### ***Support groups***

Some groups are formal and focus on learning about cancer or dealing with feelings. Others are informal and social. Some groups are made up of only people with cancer or only caregivers, while some include spouses, family members, or friends. Other groups focus on certain types of cancer or stages of disease. The length of time groups meet can range from a set number of weeks to an ongoing program. Some programs have closed membership and others are open to new, drop-in members.

It's very important that you get information about any support group you are considering. Ask the group leader or facilitator what types of patients are in the group and if anyone in the group is dealing with survival after cancer.

Online support groups may be another option for support. The Cancer Survivors Network, an online support community supported by your American Cancer Society is just one example. You can visit this community at <http://csn.cancer.org><sup>4</sup>. There are many other good communities on the Internet that you can join as well, although you'll want to check them out before joining.

### ***Counseling***

Some people feel better having a person-to-person connection with a counselor who can give one-on-one attention and encouragement. Your cancer care team may be able to recommend a counselor who works with cancer survivors.

### ***Spirituality and religion***

Religion can be a great source of strength for some people. Some find new faith during a cancer experience. Others find that cancer informs their existing faith or their faith

provides newfound strength. Still others find themselves questioning their faith. If you are a religious person, a minister, rabbi, other leader of your faith, or a trained pastoral counselor can help you identify your spiritual needs and find spiritual support. Some members of the clergy are specially trained to help minister to people with cancer and their families.

Spirituality is important to many people, even those who don't practice a formal religion. Many people are comforted by recognizing that they're part of something greater than themselves, which helps them find meaning in life. Spiritual practices can help foster connection to others, to the present moment, and to the sacred or significant. Meditation, practicing gratitude, helping others, and spending time in nature are just a few of the many ways that people address spiritual needs.

### **Bottom line**

Keep in mind that you are a cancer survivor and remember the good news: You are one of millions of Americans alive today who has had cancer, and the survival rate is improving all the time. Like most of them, you and the people around you can adjust to and lead a fulfilling life after cancer.

### **To learn more**

We have a lot more information that you might find helpful. Explore [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org) or call our National Cancer Information Center toll-free number, 1-800-227-2345. We're here to help you any time, day or night.

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