

Emotional Health *For Adult Cancer Survivors*

Emotional health is an important part of healthy cancer survivorship. There is no “right” way to feel after you’ve completed cancer treatment (surgery, radiation, and/or chemotherapy). Patients and their loved ones often experience complex emotions with a range of feelings, from excited and relieved to overwhelmed and uncertain.

Being a cancer survivor means different things for different people. For some, survivorship starts the minute after a diagnosis. For others, it is after treatment or after reaching a milestone. Regardless of what “survivor” means to you, finishing treatment and negotiating life after cancer is complicated.

Everyone (you, your family, and your friends) wants to celebrate after treatment ends – it’s well deserved. However, after the “party,” it can be challenging to sort through what happens next. There are many myths and expectations about ending treatment. You may think that you shouldn’t need more support, that you should return to your pre-cancer self, or that you should feel completely well. In reality, survivorship can be a difficult and challenging transition. You may experience changes in relationships, have challenges getting back to work, and have complex emotions, such as guilt, fear of recurrence, grief, anger, sadness, or regret.

Sort Out Your Feelings

If you don’t feel like celebrating or your “party” feelings don’t last very long, know that this is completely normal. It takes time to sort through your cancer experience. Figuring out how best to cope with these expected adjustments and challenges takes time. Here are some helpful things to think about as you identify what works best for you.

- **Get the facts.** Sometimes patients and families worry about questions that have answers. Your doctor or nurse can be helpful in addressing these questions so you have clear information.
- **Take care of your body.** With so many things to get back to after treatment, it is easy to forget to slow down, take breaks, and take care of yourself. Now is a good time to focus on how to get a good night’s sleep, eat a healthy diet, and go for a walk.
- **Pay attention to your thoughts and emotions.** After treatment ends, it’s common to feel stress when there’s time to think about what you’ve been through. Take time to find ways to manage your stress. Consider practicing relaxation techniques, finding humor, or connecting with others. Sometimes getting additional help is needed. Be sure to talk with your medical provider about any coping concerns you or a family member are experiencing.
- **Plan for distraction.** Everyone needs a break from reality sometimes! Keeping busy, reading a book, watching television, taking a vacation, and going on a long walk with a friend are all examples of how to get away for a little while. Just remember, moderation is key. If you find you need more and more distractions, it may be time to get some additional support and help.
- **Keep it simple.** You and your family and friends have been through a lot. Take time to figure out and put your energy into what is most important to you.

Sometimes, just knowing that others have gone through a similar experience can help. Here are some words from a fellow survivor:

“It is about change, about grieving for expected futures, finding strength amidst darkness, self-discovery, searching for meaning, re-evaluating who I am – and who and what is important to me – looking for hope and finding ways to cope with the unknown. It is hard, wonderful, and always surprising.”

Adult Survivorship Program

a member of the LIVESTRONG Survivorship Center of Excellence Network

Additional Resources

Cancer Survivorship Books

- *100 Questions and Answers about Life After Cancer: A Survivor's Guide*, by Page Tolbert and Penny Damaskos
- *Everyone's Guide to Cancer Survivorship: A Road Map for Better Health*, by Ernest Rosenbaum and Holly Gautier
- *Picking up the Pieces: Moving Forward after Surviving Cancer*, by Sherri Magee and Kathy Scalzo
- *Surviving After Cancer: Living the New Normal*, by Anne Katz
- *The Cancer Survivor's Guide: The Essential Handbook to Life After Cancer*, by Michael Feuerstein and Patricia Findley
- *Your Brain After Chemo: A Practical Guide to Lifting the Fog and Getting Back Your Focus*, by Dan Silverman and Idelle Davidson

Survivorship Websites

- Cancer Survivorship, American Society of Clinical Oncology, www.cancer.net/survivorship
- Facing Forward: Life After Cancer Treatment, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/life-after-treatment
- Office of Cancer Survivorship, National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health, <http://dccps.nci.nih.gov/ocs>

Stress Management Books

- *Feeling Good: The New Mood to Therapy*, by David D. Burns
- *Rituals of Healing: Using Imagery for Health and Wellness*, by Jeanne Achterberg and Barbara Dossey
- *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook*, by Edmund J. Bourne
- *The Cognitive Behavioral Workbook for Depression: A Step-by-Step Program*, by William J. Knaus and Albert Ellis
- *The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook for Anxiety: Breaking Free of Worry, Panic, PTSD, and Other Anxiety Symptoms*, by Alexander Chapman
- *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*, by Martha Davis
- *The Way of the Journal*, by Kathleen Adams
- *Thoughts and Feelings: Taking Control of Your Moods and Your Life*, by Matthew McKay, Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning

Many of these books are available on loan at no cost through Dana-Farber's Eleanor and Maxwell Blum Patient and Family Resource Center (on Yawkey 1) or at your local public library.

Still have questions?

For more information or support, please visit www.dana-farber.org/survivor or contact the Adult Survivorship Program by phone at **617-632-4LAD (Life After Diagnosis)** or email at dfci_adultsurvivors@dfci.harvard.edu.

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