

Managing Stress After Cancer Treatment

Communication helps cancer survivors cope with stress



When cancer survivors finish treatment, they have completed a trying journey—they no longer have to cope with hair loss, nausea, pain, and other side effects.

But as survivors prepare to move on with their lives, they may need help managing the stress that comes after treatment.

Common stressors

One of the most common stressors for cancer survivors who finish treatment is the fear of recurrence or of new cancers. The most important aspect of the fear of recurrence is its domino effect. In addition to stress, the fear of recurrence triggers anxiety, sleep disturbance, and fatigue—which can negatively affect health, lifestyle, and relationships with others.

Other common stressors for cancer survivors include beginning a new chapter in life (many survivors worry about how friends, family, or coworkers might perceive them), lacking energy to complete daily activities, and facing the financial aftermath of treatment. Young survivors may also struggle with infertility resulting from cancer treatment.

Managing stress

The first step in coping with stress after cancer treatment is communicating openly with caregivers and health care providers. Survivors and caregivers must be able to recognize and understand stress and be ready to start the conversation about stress even if health care providers do not bring it up. For example, lack of sleep, anxiety, and low mood are symptoms of stress that should be reported to physicians or social workers.

Guadalupe Palos, Dr.P.H., R.N., a manager in the Office of Cancer Survivorship and coordinator of the survivorship research program at The University of Texas MD Anderson



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Cancer Center, has seen firsthand how stress affects the emotional and spiritual health of cancer survivors. She advises survivors undergoing stress to talk about it and seek help right away. “Without help, managing stress is very difficult,” she said.

Dr. Palos said it is important to be open and communicate stress symptoms so that they can be treated properly. Ignoring stress or not seeking help from others can limit survivors’ quality of life after finishing cancer treatment. Dr. Palos added that some cancer survivors might be reluctant to discuss their stress. In those cases, she said, caregivers can help by turning to health care providers for alternative options.

Finding resources

Several resources are available to help cancer survivors cope with stress. Support groups, online services, phone help lines, social workers, and friends and family are social platforms where stress can be discussed.

Social workers are a valuable resource. They can perform psychological assessments and locate resources that can help to reduce stress. Many hospitals have social workers on staff, or cancer survivors can find social workers in their area with the help

of the National Association of Social Workers.

Numerous resources are available through the American Cancer Society, including support communities and networks, tips for a healthy life after treatment, online live chats, and phone help lines that are open around the clock.

Looking ahead

According to Dr. Palos, cancer survivors can improve their quality of life by addressing stress early. “Clinicians and oncologists do a fantastic job in taking care of the physical side effects, but we also need to focus on the spiritual and emotional health,” she said. “We encourage survivors to be proactive to prevent a crisis rather than reactive when they are in a really bad one.” ■

– R. Molar-Candanos

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Ask your physician
- Visit www.mdanderson.org/survivorship
- Call askMDAnderson at 877-632-6789
- Visit the American Cancer Society at www.cancer.org/treatment
- Find a social worker through the National Association of Social Workers at www.helpstartshere.org/find-a-social-worker