

Guide to Healthy Living

EMOTIONAL HEALTH



HERE'S TO YOU

Cancer's impact is far-reaching and extends beyond physical health. Even after treatment, cancer survivors still need time to recover, improve their mental health, and process their emotions.

Finding your “new normal” as a cancer survivor is a journey. That’s where this guide comes in. You’ll find expert information, practical tips, and trusted resources that will help you and your care partners come up with a plan that feels right for where you are today.

OUR GUIDE CAN HELP YOU

- Understand common emotions survivors feel after treatment.
- Identify experts and support groups to help you process your feelings.
- Recognize your needs and feel more comfortable talking to your loved ones about them.
- Learn ways to care for your own emotional health as a cancer survivor or as a caregiver.
- Find organizations that provide information, support, and resources.

“People think just because you beat cancer that every day the sun’s shining on you, when it’s not. Even when it should be. There’s a lot of scars on the inside that people don’t know and don’t see. And they don’t understand.”

MARK

Hodgkin Lymphoma

WHAT YOU'RE FEELING IS NORMAL

You probably have many emotions right now—like relief, gratitude, and excitement. But you may also be feeling isolated, anxious, and sad. After all, you've been through a lot.

But the end of treatment can also be a beginning. You and the people who care for you can work together to figure out what the next chapter of your life will look like.

STRESS

Life after cancer can be as stressful as treatment. Family life, work, finances, and staying healthy are a lot to deal with. Ways to reduce stress are listed below. Try these or other approaches, and find out which work best for you.

- **Exercise** reduces stress and eases tension, both physically and mentally. Exercise releases *endorphins* (feel-good hormones). It also helps stretch out muscles that can become tight due to stress. Check with your doctor before you start to see if there are any exercises you should avoid.
- **Meditation and guided relaxation** can help quiet your mind. Look for classes in your community or download apps and videos that you can use at home.
- **Creative activities** like art, dance, music, writing, or crafts can help you work out feelings, calm your mind, and give you something enjoyable to focus on.
- **Sharing personal stories** gives you a chance to talk about how you're feeling and hear how other cancer survivors are adjusting.

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

It's normal to still feel angry, tense, or sad after treatment. These feelings may go away over time. If these emotions feel overwhelming, you could be experiencing anxiety or depression. Start by talking to your doctor about options. Reach out for help right away.



LONELINESS

After treatment, it's easy to feel cut off from other people who may not understand what you're going through. You may also miss the support you received from your health care team. But support is out there!

- Ask your nurses and doctors if you can still call them. This can help you stay connected.
- Support groups (in person or online) are a great way to meet with other survivors to share feelings, concerns, and journeys to a "new normal."

ANGER

You may feel angry during and after treatment for a lot of reasons: the diagnosis itself, a bad experience with a doctor, or an unsupportive friend or relative. These feelings may go away over time as you settle into your new routine. The tips below may help.

- Ask yourself: What's causing my anger and what can I do about it? Answering these questions and talking about how you're feeling can help you manage your anger.
- Learn ways to calm your temper. You can learn ways to redirect angry feelings and reframe your thoughts.
- Focus on what you can control. Being involved in your health care, keeping your appointments, making changes in your lifestyle, or even setting your daily schedule are things you can control. When you feel more in control, you're less likely to feel frustrated and angry.
- Take action. Sometimes the best way to cope with anger is to join a cause. For example, becoming a cancer advocate could help give purpose and meaning to your experience.

COPING WITH CHEMO BRAIN

You may have heard about "chemo brain." Chemo brain is a term cancer survivors use to describe thinking and memory problems that may happen during and after cancer treatment. Emotional and mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, stress, and having trouble sleeping can add to that foggy feeling. Chemo brain can also intensify feelings of frustration or anger. That's OK. These feelings can be managed.



MORE INFORMATION

- The **National Cancer Institute** lists common feelings that cancer survivors have and offers helpful tips to cope. www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/feelings
- On its **Emotional, Mental Health, and Mood Changes** page, the American Cancer Society explains how to recognize these changes and get help when needed. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/emotional-mood-changes.html
- In CDC's "**Talk to Someone**" simulation, Linda, a cancer survivor, gives advice on anxiety and distress. You can choose different options to get answers to your questions about making healthy choices. www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/life-after-cancer/talk-to-someone-simulation.htm

HOW TO COPE WITH YOUR FEELINGS

TALK ABOUT IT—EVEN WHEN IT'S HARD

You may feel uncomfortable talking about mental health and your struggles. Family members or friends may not want talk about it. It may go against your cultural beliefs, or you may feel you should be “strong” or “brave” and keep it to yourself. No matter the reason, it’s important to understand that sharing what you’re going through mentally is just as important to your health as sharing how you feel physically.

IT'S OK TO REACH OUT FOR HELP

Every feeling you have is real and valid. Talking to experts is very important, because mental health problems can get worse if they are ignored.

Your doctor and other health care providers—such as nurses, social workers, or patient navigators—can match you with a specialist who can help you address your concerns through different types of talk and behavioral therapy, relaxation techniques, medication, and referrals to support groups. Talking with people who may have had similar experiences can help you feel less alone, give you different perspectives, and help you learn how others have dealt with the same challenges.

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR

- Does my medicine cause any mental or emotional side effects?
- Is what I'm feeling common? How can I deal with these feelings?
- Is counseling or a support group right for me?

FIND SPECIALISTS AND RESOURCES

A variety of professionals can help you manage your feelings, address the issues you’re facing, and find resources in your community, including:

- **Psychologists, clinical social workers, and counselors** are trained mental health specialists who are licensed by the state to diagnose and treat mental health problems. They can help you manage your feelings and concerns. Many of these professionals, such as oncology social workers, specialize in working with people who are facing cancer.
- **Psychiatrists** are medical doctors who specialize in psychology or mental health. In addition to providing different therapies, they can also prescribe medications.
- **Faith or spiritual counselors** can help you cope with concerns such as feeling alone, fearing death, searching for meaning, and having doubts about your faith.

If you seek help from a specialist, make sure you find one you feel comfortable with and who can help you address the issues you’re facing. At your first meeting, ask questions like:

- What are your credentials, training, and experiences? Do you have a specialty? Do you have experience helping people who have faced problems like mine?
- How have you helped people who have faced these issues in the past?
- How long have you been practicing? And specifically, how long have you been helping people with similar problems?
- What approach will you take to help me? Do you practice a particular type of therapy?
- How often do you generally meet with clients (weekly? every other week?) and for how many weeks, months, or years?
- How will you check my progress against my goals for therapy? What will happen if I don't start to feel better?
- Is medication an option? Is so, how will you coordinate prescriptions if you're not licensed to prescribe medications?

SUPPORT GROUPS AND OTHER PROGRAMS

Ask your health care team or local community centers, clinics, or places of worship about programs they may offer. Some hospitals, clinics, and support organizations offer special classes or cancer-specific support groups. Many advocacy organizations offer support groups that meet in person and online.

- **Cancer survivor support groups:** These groups bring together survivors to talk about how they're feeling.
- **Family support groups:** Your whole family may want to be involved in the healing process. In these programs, you and your family members take part in therapy sessions with trained specialists to help you talk about problems, learn about each other's needs, and find answers.
- **Stress management programs:** These programs teach ways to relax and take more control over stress. Hospitals, clinics, and local cancer organizations may offer these programs and classes.

If you can't find a program in your area, look into alternatives to in-person support such as virtual support groups and therapy by phone, video, or text.

MORE INFORMATION

- The **National Cancer Institute** explains what cancer support groups are and how to find one in your area. www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/adjusting-to-cancer/support-groups
- The **American Cancer Society** offers support services and programs for cancer survivors in a variety of situations. www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services.html
- The **Cancer Support Community** offers free support and counseling for cancer patients and loved ones. www.cancersupportcommunity.org
- **CancerCare** provides support to help you cope with emotional, practical, and financial concerns. www.cancercare.org
- The **Cancer Hope Network** connects patients with trained volunteers who have had similar cancer experiences. www.cancerhopenetwork.org
- The **National Institute of Mental Health** provides information on mental health, specialists, and research. www.nimh.nih.gov/health/find-help/

“As a cancer survivor, you have to find your people. You have to find the people that understand you, support you, get you...Those are the people you can find via Facebook groups, via Google, via just looking up what your diagnosis is.”

XENIA

Endometrial and Uterine Cancer

TALKING TO YOUR LOVED ONES

Talking to your family and friends may be challenging. Start by letting those around you know that you welcome their questions and concerns. Let them know what you do—and don’t—feel comfortable sharing. Some topics to consider discussing include:

- **Changing roles and responsibilities.** The relationship and roles between you and your care partners may have changed during treatment. They may even change after treatment as well. It’s a good idea to talk together about feelings and changes.
- **How friends and family can offer support.** Those closest to you may not know how to support you after treatment. Be open, honest, and specific about how they can help (or not help) in your new normal.
- **Patience.** It’s important to discuss expectations for recovery and to be patient throughout the process. Everything may not go back to “normal” right away, and that’s OK.

Family support groups or counseling may be a great way to start the conversation. A professional can ask questions to guide you and your family.

When you talk with your family and friends, be honest about your feelings. It’s important to share how you’re feeling, accept help, and let others know what to expect from you.

BE KIND TO YOURSELF

Getting back to normal may take time. When your cancer treatment ends, you may feel relieved or empowered. You may also have a new set of goals or worry about what’s next. You may find that it takes time before you can do some of the things you did before. You may depend on other people for help more than you are used to, and you may worry about money and about your cancer coming back.

Try to be patient and open-minded about what your “new normal” looks like—and talk to someone about it.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CARE PARTNERS

It’s easy to forget to take care of yourself when you’re busy supporting someone with cancer. But it’s just as important.

Caregiving is stressful, and it’s easy to ignore your own emotional health. Ask yourself:

- Am I feeling overwhelmed?
- Am I staying active?
- Should I reach out to family members or friends for emotional support?
- Am I worried about money? See our list of resources that may be able to help at www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors/patients/paying-for-cancer-treatment.htm.

After treatment ends, your role may change, and you may find it’s a good time to follow the recommendations for good emotional health.

MORE INFORMATION

- AARP’s **Caregiving Resource Center** provides family caregivers with information, tools, and resources. www.aarp.org/home-family/caregiving/
- The **Caregiver Action Network** takes caregivers through step-by-step processes to help them handle their caregiving situation. <https://caregiveraction.org>
- The **Family Caregiver Alliance** helps families find government, nonprofit, and private caregiver support programs. <https://www.caregiver.org>
- The **ARCH National Respite Network** provides resources and information on respite care. <https://archrespite.org>
- The **Well Spouse Association** provides resources and information for caregivers and loved ones. <https://wellspouse.org>

WHAT IS MY NEXT STEP?

You can map out a journey for your emotional well-being. Take some time to reflect on the following prompts and share your responses with your loved ones and your health care support team.

My questions are _____

My next steps are _____

My goals are _____



HOW TO IDENTIFY CREDIBLE INFORMATION SOURCES

The Internet is full of information, and we want to make sure you're getting the right answers.

When determining whether a website offers good information backed by medical evidence, your best bet is to look at the owner. The most credible sites offer information that is backed by unbiased research and has gone through a strict review process to ensure that everything they publish is accurate and beneficial.

Stick to government sites such as CDC or the National Cancer Institute, or well-known organizations such as CDC's Comprehensive Cancer Control National Partnership, local service groups, or health institutions you know.

“This is your new normal, so embrace it. And continue looking forward to the future, because none of us know what that will bring.”

WENORA

Basal Cell Carcinoma, Colorectal and Endometrial Cancer

Reviewed March 2021
www.cdc.gov/cancer/survivors

