5 Things Cancer Survivors Should Know About Their Mental Health

Mental health care is as important as caring for your physical health during and after cancer treatment

May 31, 2018 By Natasha Buchanan Lunsford

It’s normal to feel worried, sad, afraid, or even angry after being diagnosed with cancer. Some treatments for cancer also can affect your feelings or make it hard for you to concentrate or remember things.

Since May is Mental Health Awareness Month, now is a good time to understand that mental health care is as important as caring for your physical health during and after cancer treatment.

Chemo Brain Is Real!

You may have heard about “chemo brain.” Chemo brain describes problems with thinking (cognition, memory, attention) that may occur as a result of receiving chemotherapy to treat cancer. These concerns may affect patients during or after cancer treatments. Emotional and mental health problems that survivors may face—such as depression, anxiety, stress, and trouble sleeping—can all contribute to this and make thinking and learning harder. You could have difficulty learning new facts or skills, concentrating, or remembering things during and after treatment.

It’s Important to Talk About It—Even When It’s Hard

You may feel like it’s more difficult to talk about mental health problems, or you may feel uncomfortable talking about your struggles. Maybe it’s because your family members or friends don’t talk about mental health, your cultural beliefs don’t support having mental health discussions, or you feel you should be “strong” or “brave” and keep it to yourself. Nobody is wrong for feeling one way or another, but it’s important to understand that sharing how you’re feeling mentally is just as important as sharing how you feel physically. Talk to your health care provider about how you are feeling emotionally. You may also find that support groups for cancer survivors can be helpful places where you can talk to other people with similar experiences.

Be Patient—Getting Back to “Normal” May Take Time

You may be relieved after your cancer treatment is finished, feel empowered, or have a new set of goals that you are ready to pursue. But you may also worry about life after cancer. It may take time before you are able to do some of the things you did before at work, at home, or in daily life. 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. If you experience these things, be patient about getting back to feeling “normal.” Be open-minded about what your “new normal” looks like—and talk to someone about it.

You Can Do Something About It…

Talk to your health care team about how you feel—not just physically, but also mentally—before, during, and after treatment. They can refer you to health care providers who can help you manage these changes. Talking to experts about ways you can adjust is very important, because mental health problems can get worse if they are ignored.

…And So Can Your Health Care Team

Your care team can assess and monitor changes in your mental health and, when indicated, link you with mental health professionals who can address concerns through talk therapy, relaxation interventions, medication, and referrals to online or in-person groups with people who may have similar experiences as you, so you know you’re not alone in going through this. Your team can also give you tips for things that might improve your mental health, like diet, exercise, and getting enough sleep.

Together, your physical and mental health care teams can help keep you as healthy as possible during this time of uncertainty and change.

This article was originally published on May 17, 2018, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It is republished with permission.

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