

## Mental Health in Survivorship

Entering into survivorship after completing cancer treatment can often be a difficult transition. You may experience challenges with returning to work or assuming your day-to-day responsibilities, changes in relationships, and several complex emotions. You may feel guilt, grief, sadness, anger, regret, or fear of recurrence, which can negatively affect your daily life. Thus, cancer survivors may benefit from seeing a mental health professional for therapy, counseling, and help to navigate these emotions.

### Types of Mental Health Professionals

- **Social Workers** have a master's degree in social work (MSW) and have the ability to diagnose mental health disorders and provide therapy.
- **Mental Health Counselors** have a master's degree in counseling (MHC) and can diagnose mental health disorders as well as provide therapy.
- **Psychologists** have a doctoral degree in psychology (PhD or PsyD) and can diagnose mental health disorders as well as provide psychological testing and therapy.
- **Psychiatrists** are medical doctors (MD) who have specialized training in mental health and treatment. Psychiatrists can prescribe medicines and may also provide therapy.

### Getting Started

**Medical Insurance:** Most people use insurance to pay for mental health services because it can be expensive. Contact your insurance provider with the phone number on your insurance card to find out more about the mental health services are covered and ask the following questions:

- What services are covered? Is there a co-pay? How many sessions are covered?
- Does your insurance cover any mental health provider or do you need to see a provider that is part of their insurance network?
- Does the insurance plan have a list of providers that are covered in your area?

**Speak to your primary care provider** and ask about mental health professionals in your area. Ask if there are specific professionals that they would recommend and are covered by your insurance.

**Once you have the names of two to three mental health professionals that you are interested in, reach out to their offices.** They will most likely walk you through an intake process in which you can:

- Talk about your concerns and ask about their areas of expertise.
- Ask about availability, fees, and insurance.
- If you feel comfortable with the answers, make an appointment.

**During your first visit:** Prepare to share the reasons that led you to seek help. The mental health professional may ask you in-depth questions about your personal and medical history. Ask the provider what treatment they recommend and what other treatments may be available. Ask about benefits, possible risks or side effects, and length of treatment.

**Find someone who you feel comfortable with and can trust.** It may take a few visits for the medical health professional to get to know you and for you to confirm whether the medical health professional is a good “fit” for you. If you don’t feel that the provider is not the best match for you, you can be honest and talk to them about that. The provider may be able to change the approach to your therapy or help you find a therapist who is a better match for you.

## **Common Types of Mental Health Treatment**

**Medicine** can be used as part of your mental health treatment, as medicine is often used together with psychotherapy. Treatment typically involves identifying some symptoms and trying a medicine to help alleviate them.

**Psychotherapy** involves speaking with a therapist to better understand and resolve complex emotions. The most common types are:

- **Behavior therapy** focuses on changing patterns of behavior. Treatment often includes keeping records of concerns or symptoms, learning new behaviors and coping mechanisms, and learning relaxation and stress management. Behavior therapy may be used alongside cognitive therapy.
- **Cognitive therapy** focuses on identifying thought patterns that lead to troublesome feelings and behaviors. Treatment often involves recording problematic thoughts and developing new thought patterns.
- **Group therapy** brings together a group of people with shared experiences to support each other in bringing about change. Treatment often includes group members discussing their experiences and getting feedback and encouragement from one another.
- **Teletherapy**, also known as telepsychology, allows you to talk to a medical health provider remotely through technology. Teletherapy can happen over phone calls, text messages, live chats, or video call.

## **What can I do to combat feelings of depression or anxiety?**

- Eating a healthy, well-balanced diet and avoiding processed, high-calorie foods, foods with little nutritional value, or foods high in saturated fats or added sugars.
- Exercise is one of the most effective ways to combat mood disorders – cancer survivors should aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous physical activity per week. Aerobic or strength-building exercise is helpful to improve symptoms of fatigue.
- Try to go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day.
- If you have difficulty sleeping, doing gentle yoga with breathing exercises may help people feel less tired and have better quality sleep at night.
- Stay hydrated with fluids throughout the day.
- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon or evening, and limit alcohol.
- Do what you enjoy, but in moderation. Engage in new or old interests that do not tire you out.

- Let others help you with giving you a ride, cooking a meal, doing laundry, or picking up something at the store. If nobody offers, reach out and ask for your needs. Family and friends may want to help but do not know how to.
- Consider joining a support group for people with cancer. Talking about your complex emotions with people who share the same difficulty can help you learn new ways to cope.
- Stay connected. Keep in touch with friends and family and consider joining a support group for cancer survivors.

These are some suggestions for coping with complex emotions which is a common challenge among cancer survivors. However, if you are having a difficult time managing, please speak with your health care provider.

### **When Should You Call Your Healthcare Team?**

**If you experience any of the following, call your healthcare team:**

- You are losing weight unintentionally
- You are so tired that you cannot do your daily activities like bathing, getting dressed, or eating
- Your fear of recurrence is not allowing you to get the recommended follow-up, surveillance imaging, or blood work

**Please call 911 or the suicide and crisis lifeline at 988 if you have thoughts to hurt yourself or others.**