

Circle Of Life: Cancer Education and Wellness

for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities



American Cancer Society Circle Of LifeSM
Cancer Education and Wellness for American Indian and Alaska Native Communities

Wellness Along the Cancer Journey:

Treatment

Revised October 2015

Chapter 2: Coping with Feelings about Cancer



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Coping with Feelings about Cancer

Group Discussion		True	False	Not Sure
1.	It is best not to bother others about fears and concerns about cancer.			
2.	Once treatment is over, a person can jump right back into their normal routine.			
3.	Wellness means taking care of one's physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual needs.			

Receiving a Cancer Diagnosis

People go through many different feelings when they first learn they have cancer – shock, disbelief, fear, anxiety, guilt, sadness, grief, depression, anger, and more. It's important to know that these feelings are normal and that there are ways to cope. There are many resources and support systems for people who just found out they have cancer.

When someone first hears the words “you have cancer” they may not be able to hear or think of anything else. They may be in shock and feel numb. It may be hard to believe what they have just heard. They may have trouble listening to, understanding, or remembering what people tell them during this time. It is fairly common for people to shut down mentally as soon as they hear the word “cancer.”

A person who just found out they have cancer may feel scared, uncertain, or angry about the unwanted changes cancer will bring to their life. They may feel sad or be worried about telling others. They may worry about how other people will react to finding out, and wonder how others will treat them.

There is nothing fair about cancer and no one “deserves” to have it. A cancer diagnosis is hard to take, and having cancer is not easy. As a person thinks about the chance of death and copes with cancer treatment, they may look more closely at their lives. They may review spiritual beliefs, their personal and family values,

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and what's most important to them. Accepting the diagnosis and figuring out how to live with cancer is a challenge.

Feelings About a Cancer Diagnosis

Each person who is diagnosed with cancer may have a wide range of feelings, and each person will handle them in a different way.

The first emotion may be shock, because no one is ever ready to hear that they have cancer. It is normal for people with cancer to wonder why it happened to them or to think life has treated them unfairly. They may not even believe they have cancer, especially if they don't feel sick.

Someone who just found out they have cancer may also be afraid. While some people fear cancer itself, others may be afraid of cancer treatments and wonder how they will get through them. Fear of pain and suffering is one of the greatest fears people with cancer and their loved ones have. They may wonder what will happen to their family, or fear they'll become a burden to them.

A person with cancer may feel guilty. They may ask if they could have noticed symptoms earlier, or wonder if something they did caused the cancer. They may wonder if they were exposed to something at home or work that led to cancer. Or they may worry that other members of their family will also get cancer. At this time we do not know the causes of most cancers. But a few are known to be inherited, or passed from a parent to a child. This means if one family member has cancer, others in the family may have a higher risk of getting it, too. This can cause even more concerns for the person with cancer.

Someone may feel hopeless or sad if they see cancer as a roadblock to a life full of health and happiness. It is hard to feel happy and upbeat, especially if the future is uncertain. Just thinking about treatment and the time it will take out of their life can seem like too much to handle. Feelings of sadness or uncertainty may vary as the person continues their journey through cancer treatment and recovery.

A person may feel loss, and start to grieve over their cancer diagnosis and treatment. Cancer can change someone's sense of self. It can change how they think of their bodies, themselves, and their future. Grief is a normal response to

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these kinds of losses. The person with cancer gives up old ideas of their life and must come up with ways to cope with the new, unwanted changes. It may take time for them to even notice these losses and changes. It can help if they share their grief with someone close. If there is no one nearby whom they want to confide in, they might want to see a mental health professional. A person's feelings need care too, just like their physical body needs care.

A person with cancer might feel angry. Some people may not show their anger and frustration. Others may turn their anger toward family, friends, or health care providers. This is usually not done on purpose. Feelings that are denied or ignored may come out in ways that seem unrelated to their source. For instance, a woman who is angry about having breast cancer may become more irritable with her family. Or a man who is sad about having lung cancer may find himself filled with grief over things that don't usually bother him. It may help if family and friends understand that they are not expected to solve every problem – just to listen.

It's important for a person with cancer to be aware of their feelings about cancer, and find ways to understand and deal with them. Emotions can affect how they feel about themselves, how they view life, and the decisions they make about treatment.

Going through cancer treatment, many people keep on having a mix of emotions. They may be relieved about starting treatment and have hope about beating cancer. They can feel worried about whether the treatments will work, and sad about the challenges they face. They may feel anxious or fearful about the future. All of these emotions, and many more, are normal. Remember that talking with friends, family, or attending a cancer support group may help a person cope with cancer and its treatment.

Coping with a Cancer Diagnosis

Some people find it easier to face the reality of a new or scary situation if they learn as much as they can about it. This is especially true when dealing with a complex disease like cancer. There is often a great fear of the unknown and uncertainty about what is going to happen. Knowledge can help lessen the fear of

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the unknown. A person can learn about the type of cancer they have, treatments, and their chances for recovery.

Even though people facing cancer cannot change their diagnosis, they can find reliable, up-to-date information. Knowledge is power. Talking with the health care team is a good place to start. A person can find out exactly what type of cancer they have, and what stage it is. Learning about the types of treatments that are offered for their cancer type and stage can help a person make informed decisions.

It may be hard to think of the right questions to ask a health care provider. This list has key questions that will help someone gather the information they need to make decisions about their treatment.

- Exactly what kind of cancer do I have?
- How do I get a copy of my pathology report?
- Where is the cancer located? Has it spread beyond where it started?
- What is the cancer's stage? What does that mean?
- Will I need more tests before we can decide on treatment?
- What are my treatment choices?
- What treatment do you recommend, and why?
- What is the goal of this treatment?
- Are there other treatments available?
- What are the risks and benefits of the recommended treatment?
- Should I think about taking part in a clinical trial?
- What is the likely outcome of choosing not to have treatment at this time?

A person may also want to talk with family, friends, and others who have cancer. Finding good sources of support can help people with cancer take control of their situation. There are resources that can help someone move forward in their cancer journey.

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Activity

There are ways people can support themselves and reduce stress. Discuss one of more of the questions below. You can complete these questions at home if you choose.

What makes you feel happy?

1. When do you feel most relaxed and able to be yourself?
2. Which people in your life help you feel positive and empowered?
3. What types of activities help you feel happy and good about yourself?
4. What can be done to help make your home and life supportive and renewing?
5. List any changes you want to make in your life to support what is important to you. When do you want to start these changes?

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Story of Hope

“There is a fear that goes through you when you are told you have cancer. It's so hard in the beginning to think about anything but your diagnosis. It's the first thing you think about every morning. I want people diagnosed with cancer to know it does get better. Talking about your cancer helps you deal with all of the new emotions you are feeling. Remember, it's normal to get upset.”

Delores, cancer survivor

(Silver, J.K. (Ed.), (2009). What Helped Me Get Through: Cancer Survivors Share Wisdom and Hope. Atlanta: American Cancer Society.)

Key Messages

- Find a support system of friends and loved ones.
- Get support from other cancer survivors.
- Explore spiritual beliefs.
- Learn new things.
- Know what is most important.
- Find and use humor in your life.

(Lance Armstrong Foundation, (2009). Livestrong® Guidebook. Austin: Publisher)