

SURVIVORSHIP

The Role of Emotional and Spiritual Health in Cancer Survivorship

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Summary

Emotional and spiritual health play an important role in cancer survivorship. This article includes:

- *Overall Role in Cancer Survivorship*
- *Caregivers and Emotional Health*
- *The No. 1 Rule of Emotional Health After Treatment*
- *The Power of Community*

Emotional Health

Cancer survivorship extends far beyond physical healing. While medical treatment targets the disease, the emotional and spiritual dimensions of recovery often determine how fully patients, caregivers, and survivors can move forward with their lives. Emotional and spiritual well-being are essential to survivorship, influencing resilience, relationships, and quality of life for everyone affected by cancer. However, the process of maintaining or regaining a sense of emotional and spiritual wellness is not linear, it might feel like a rollercoaster of ups and downs.

For patients, the emotional impact of a cancer diagnosis can be overwhelming. Fear, uncertainty, sadness, anger, and even guilt are common responses. The rigors of treatment – chemotherapy, radiation, surgery – can leave not only physical scars but emotional ones as

well. Their life has been imprinted by this moment that they didn't ask for. As treatment progresses, patients may feel isolated or misunderstood, even by loved ones who want to help but do not fully grasp the depth of the experience. Roles have shifted, and the patient's identity may have gotten lost along the way, whether it be their job or the role within a group or family.

Change is hard, and patients need time to emotionally process what they've gone through. Emotional processing is not on the medical treatment plan they are given. In reality, patients are experiencing loss – time, finances, enjoyment, change in eating habits, intimacy with a partner, body changes. Some of these changes might require needing more help from others, which can feel hard. There are cultural barriers to asking for help, as if it's not normal. However, experiencing cancer is not normal, and we all need help sometimes.

Tending to emotional health during this time is crucial. Supportive counseling, mental healthcare, and open communication can provide patients with tools to process their feelings, navigate anxiety, and build emotional resilience.

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Spiritual health can become increasingly important for patients. Confronting mortality often brings existential questions to the surface. Spirituality can be an anchor, whether rooted in organized religion or a personal sense of purpose and meaning. Prayer, meditation, mindfulness, or simply connecting with nature or loved ones can offer comfort and a sense of grounding. Many patients find that nurturing their spiritual life helps them cope with fear, stay hopeful during treatment, and find peace amid uncertainty.

There is a myth that rainbows and life as normal await once treatment is completed. Survivors who have completed treatment often encounter a new set of emotional and spiritual challenges. While others may expect celebration and relief, survivors frequently experience a mix of emotions – lingering fear of recurrence, uncertainty about the future, and grief for what was lost during the illness. There may also be physical changes, fatigue, or cognitive effects that continue after treatment ends, making adjustment difficult. Some survivors feel a sense of isolation or disconnection from those who have not been through a similar experience and may be searching for an identity of who they are now. It sets the stage for a flood of emotions to break through.

The Japanese art form of kintsugi repairs broken pottery using gold. Instead of hiding the cracks, the repair highlights them, turning the once-broken object into something more beautiful and unique. This truly embodies the essence of cancer survivorship. While cancer is a shattering experience, the cracks tell a story, embracing imperfection and moving from brokenness to wholeness.

Emotional healing for survivors involves validating these complex feelings, finding new routines, developing healthy coping strategies, and dealing with the uncertainty of the future. Survivors can define mental wellness on their own terms, and there are resources to tap into. Acknowledging and accepting the individual scars and finding balance through mental and emotional wellness means tapping into support, finding self-compassion, and having power over fear.

Counseling and survivorship support groups, such as Texas Oncology's Beyond Cancer support group, can provide a safe space for processing emotions and building connections. Spiritually, survivorship often prompts reflection and reevaluation. Many survivors report a deepened sense of purpose, increased appreciation for life, or a renewed connection to their



values and beliefs. Spiritual support – whether from clergy, chaplains, or personal practices – can help make sense of their experience and move forward with clarity and hope.

Emotional and spiritual health are not separate from medical care; they are integral to holistic healing. Whether you had cancer or helped someone through cancer, tending to these dimensions fosters resilience, improves relationships, and enhances overall well-being. Addressing the full spectrum of survivorship – including the unseen emotional and spiritual burdens – allows everyone touched by cancer to heal more completely and live more fully.

The No. 1 Rule of Emotional Health After Treatment

What is the No. 1 thing people should do to maintain good emotional and mental health? *Acknowledge it.*

During and after treatment, there will be some bad days and some good days. During those not-so-good days, accept that – let yourself feel it. If it's not a good day, then feel what you are feeling that day. When you are flooded with emotion, it doesn't mean you are taking steps back. It's ok to let yourself go through the emotions.

Life has changed. It is no easy thing to go through what a cancer patient has to traverse, and it is uncharted

territory. Have acceptance that you experienced something that wasn't easy. You lost some things along the way. You also gained some things along the way. Give yourself the space and grace to know you are human.

Don't have self-judgment and compare yourself with others but do have self-compassion.

It's important to find a space to have security to *just be*.

Identify your people. During treatment and beyond, you might start reevaluating what's important in your relationships. You might find new boundaries, even with people who have been around you for a long time. Sometimes it's hard to say what you are feeling to the people around you, so it might not always be your immediate family. Sometimes it's a support group; sometimes therapy is a good option. Find a place to say the things that you are feeling inside.

Find something that is new or brings you enjoyment. Find something that is yours and where you can show up authentically.

Once you acknowledge your emotional health, you are on your way to improving.

The Power of Community

As a social worker, I know the importance of emotional and mental health, especially during stress, loss, or major life change. The most important thing people should do to maintain good emotional and mental health is stay connected. Connection – to others, to purpose, and self – is the foundation of resilience and healing.

Isolation – intentionally or otherwise – causes people’s struggles to grow heavier. When people stay connected by reaching out to a trusted friend, joining a support group, talking to a counselor, or even just expressing their feelings in a journal, they create space for healing, perspective, and hope. Emotional health isn’t about being happy all the time; it’s about having support systems and strategies in place that allow us to feel, process, and move through difficult emotions.

Connection doesn’t mean that a person has to be “on” or social all the time. They can create connectivity through spiritual practice, a creative outlet, or meaningful conversations. If people feel seen, heard, and grounded, they will be better equipped to manage stress and care for themselves and others. As people prioritize their needs, it’s important to prioritize connectivity. It’s simple, but it’s powerful.



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Julie Croom

