

SURVIVORSHIP

The Stages of Survivorship

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Summary

People with a cancer experience may encounter more than one stage of survivorship. This article includes:

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Part I: What Survivorship Means

Cancer survivors are resilient and powerful. But when does survivorship begin and what does it mean? Like the American Cancer Society, Texas Oncology defines cancer survivorship as beginning at diagnosis. There are several stages of survivorship, including those in treatment, recently completed treatment, and those who have been cancer free for a while. It also includes those living with metastatic cancer.

What survivorship means differs by the phase of the cancer experience. Someone who is newly diagnosed experiences survivorship in a different way than someone who has been cancer free for many years. What is the same is that their lives have been forever changed by experiencing cancer. A variety of factors impact survivorship, including type of cancer, side effects, other health conditions, and where you are in the cancer experience.

There's no one way to approach survivorship. The right way is what is right for you. Different people enter survivorship a bit differently. Some want to return to life as close as it was before cancer. Some embrace new adventures, learn something new, or get involved in something they never would have had the courage to do before cancer. Some are reflective and cherish time with friends and family even more. Others connect with nonprofits to become advocates for cancer awareness, research, and helping others through one of life's most challenging and vulnerable times.

You are empowered to approach survivorship on your own terms. Many of us don't know where to start, and that's ok. There are useful resources and guidance available to help you navigate it through all the stages. That guidance can be tailored to you, your circumstances, and your goals.

Start by assessing your goals, values, and what is important to you. Survivorship means giving appropriate attention to the combination of physical, social, and emotional aspects of your life. For example, physical activity can also help manage stress and anxiety.

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Connecting with people during and after treatment helps you focus on something other than cancer. Finding joy and purpose, even in the little things on the toughest days, can improve your emotional health.

Transitioning from cancer treatment is new territory for most people. Texas Oncology provides a survivorship plan as patients transition after finishing treatment. It's important to maintain regular appointments with your oncologist, which may become less frequent over time. Maintaining a relationship, or developing one, with a primary care physician is imperative to maintain good overall health. The plan also gives guidance on how to maintain a healthy lifestyle as a cancer survivor and how to mitigate side effects of treatment and prevent recurrence and other cancers.

Patients are not the only ones who experience survivorship. Caregivers have a different perspective, but they too move through the stages of survivorship. Their lives have been significantly affected and changed by cancer, too.

Texas Oncology Foundation's website has survivorship resources to guide you at any stage of survivorship. Stay tuned for the next few Foundation biweekly newsletters for more details on each survivorship stage.

Part II: Survivors in Treatment

For many, the word survivorship brings to mind life after cancer treatment. But survivorship actually begins the moment you're diagnosed – if you're currently in treatment, you are already considered a survivor.

This stage of survivorship looks different for every person, and each day will look different. Some of your days will be filled with medical appointments, managing side effects, and adjusting to changes in daily routines. Other days are a time to rest, lean on loved ones, friends, and support groups –finding moments of joy in between treatments. You didn't ask for this new normal and it may take time to adjust.

As you begin treatment, here are three steps to shape your early survivorship experience:

- 1. Explore resources.** Ask your care team what support is available. For example, oncology-trained physical therapists can help manage side effects and maintain strength. Social workers can connect you with financial, transportation, and social support resources.



2. Build your support system early. Use communication platforms (like Caring Bridge) to share updates and request specific help—such as meals, lawn care, or house cleaning. Look into peer support through local groups or nonprofits. For example, Imerman Angels pairs newly diagnosed patients with long-term survivor mentors, and organizations like Texas Oncology Foundation offer support groups and virtual education.

3. Consider professional emotional support. Just like with anything new, it's great to have guidance, and cancer survivorship is no different. A therapist can provide tools for managing overwhelming emotions and help you navigate the practical and personal challenges that come with treatment and survivorship.

There's no single "right" way to move through this stage. Survivorship is about doing what works for you, whether that means focusing on rest, staying active, or finding small ways to celebrate progress.

Part III: Survivors Who Recently Completed Treatment

Finishing cancer treatment is a huge milestone – and one worth celebrating. Yet, this stage of survivorship can also feel more complicated than expected. After months of focusing on appointments and side effects, the sudden shift to "what now?" can be both freeing and unsettling.

Your mind and body are still healing, and nagging side effects like fatigue, neuropathy (numbness or tingling), memory changes, or joint pain may still linger. It's normal to feel a mix of relief, gratitude, and even anxiety about the future. Many will encourage you to "find a

new normal," which can seem like another daunting task after all you've endured.

A survivorship care plan can be especially helpful at this stage. It outlines follow-up appointments, recommended screenings, and strategies to manage lingering side effects. It also connects you with resources for emotional health, physical rehabilitation, and peer support. These supports can lessen feelings of isolation, offer tools for managing symptoms, and provide guidance on healthy lifestyle choices like nutrition, exercise, and stress management. Just as importantly, a survivorship care plan serves as a communication bridge between you and your healthcare team. Having everything written down – what to watch for, when to check in, and who to contact with questions – can bring peace of mind and ease the uncertainty that often comes once treatment ends.

This is also a time to rediscover what brings you meaning and joy, knowing it may look different than before your cancer diagnosis. That might mean spending more time with loved ones, exploring new hobbies, or sharing your story with others. You're beginning a new chapter in life, one that takes bravery and grace as you shape life after treatment. Lean into what feels right for you, surround yourself with people who bring you peace, and allow space for hope as you move forward.

Part IV: Survivors Who Are Cancer Free

Living cancer-free for several years marks a powerful chapter in the survivorship journey. It can bring a deep sense of gratitude and a renewed appreciation for everyday life. At the same time, this stage of survivorship may still come with unique emotional and physical experiences. Some long-term survivors

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continue to manage lingering side effects, such as fatigue, neuropathy, or changes in mobility. Worry about recurrence may also resurface, especially around follow-up visits. These feelings are natural and part of the survivorship experience.

This is often the time to shift focus from recovery to long-term wellness. Staying on top of follow-up care with your oncology team and primary care provider is key. Specialists like rehabilitation therapists can support mobility and strength, while nutritionists can guide you toward eating patterns that promote energy and health. Mental health professionals, including therapists or social workers, can help process anxiety and support emotional well-being. Peer support groups – both in person and online – offer connection with others who understand.

Daily practices also matter: keeping active, managing stress, maintaining a balanced diet, and making time for joy and purpose. Some survivors also choose to mentor others, volunteer, or advocate for cancer awareness, finding meaning in giving back.

Your survivorship path is still uniquely yours. Whether you're pursuing new goals, cherishing everyday moments, or building healthier habits, this stage is about living fully while honoring how far you've come.

In our final edition of this series, we'll explore survivorship for those living with chronic cancer and what it means to find joy, purpose, and stability while still in ongoing treatment.

Part V: Survivors with Chronic Cancer

For some, survivorship doesn't mean finishing treatment, it means living with cancer as part of daily life. Chronic cancer is a type of cancer that may not completely go away, but can often be managed with ongoing treatment or careful monitoring.

People with chronic cancer may have periods when the disease is stable and requires little change in care, followed by times when treatment plans need to be

adjusted. This can last for months or even years, and while it may bring uncertainty, it doesn't take away from the fullness of who you are or the life you are building.

This stage of survivorship often involves finding balance – managing appointments, medications, and side effects while still making space for purpose, peace of mind, and fulfillment. While it can feel overwhelming at times, creating the right professional and personal support systems can make a difference.

Your oncology team will continue guiding treatment and adjusting care plans as needed, while your primary care provider helps monitor overall health and manage needs beyond cancer. Rehabilitation specialists can support strength, mobility, and daily function, and nutritionists and mental health professionals can provide strategies for wellness, energy, and emotional support.

Setting personal goals may look different in this stage of survivorship, but they can still provide direction and motivation. Just as importantly, your support system can offer encouragement and connection, reminding you that you don't have to walk this path alone. Lean on them during your difficult days and find ways to celebrate your progress together –no matter how big or small each step may feel.

Living with chronic cancer takes courage, but it also invites deep appreciation for life's everyday moments. Survivorship here is about finding stability, honoring your strength, and staying open to new possibilities as you shape your future.



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