

Life After Cancer: Continuing To Be a Caregiver



Being a caregiver for a cancer survivor can be complex. Cancer survivors can still have physical and emotional issues after treatment ends. The types of issues will change over time. As cancer survivors learn to adapt to the "new normal" and go back to roles they had before diagnosis, you may not be sure what to do. And you may have your own struggles with giving care while taking care of yourself.

Understanding cancer survivorship

After your loved one finishes cancer treatment, they may still have challenges. Some side effects of treatment can last for a while. Some may not happen until weeks or months after treatment. Your family member or friend may have job and money worries. And it can be hard to go back to a normal life after cancer. It often takes longer than expected. They will likely worry about the risk for long-lasting side effects. And it's common to worry about the cancer coming back. Caregivers also share in the survivorship experience.

Cancer treatment aftereffects

The cancer is gone. But that doesn't mean that your loved one feels fine now. Cancer and its treatments are very hard on the body. Cancer survivors often have aftereffects that can last for months or years. Organs may have been removed or damaged. Their body may not work as it did before. The medicines used can cause side effects long after a person stops taking them. After cancer, your family member or friend may struggle with:

- Tiredness (fatigue)
- Pain
- Nerve damage (neuropathy)
- Swelling caused by buildup of lymph fluid (lymphedema)
- Mouth problems
- Trouble sleeping
- Weight gain or loss
- Changes in sexual health and fertility
- Thinking (cognitive) changes
- Depression or anxiety

Talk with your loved one's healthcare team. You can find out what kinds of treatment aftereffects to expect. Ask the healthcare team:

- What can be done to help prevent problems
- How you can help ease symptoms
- What kinds of problems to keep watch for
- When to call the healthcare team

What is a cancer survivorship care plan (SCP)?

A survivorship care plan is a document to help a person move forward after cancer treatment. Some medical groups advise that healthcare providers put together an SCP for their patients. The care plan is a detailed record of cancer treatment history. And it has information to help after cancer treatment. Ask the healthcare team if they can create an SCP for your loved one.

Ways you can help now

Your loved one's needs will change. But you may still find that your family member or friend needs support. Over time they should be able to return to most, if not all, of the things they did before cancer.

As they make these adjustments and get back into everyday routines, you can give support in some of these ways:

- Cleaning the house and doing laundry
- Doing grocery shopping and other errands
- Making meals
- Caring for pets
- Helping with bathing, dressing, and using the toilet
- Filling prescriptions and keeping track of medicines
- Driving
- Arranging medical appointments
- Going along to medical appointments
- Keeping in contact with the healthcare team in case of problems
- Filing and following up on health insurance claims and medical bills
- Helping them make healthcare decisions
- Communicating with their workplace

For physical health, you can help your loved one:

- Walk or do physical therapy daily
- Keep track of symptoms
- Note any new or worse symptoms
- Call the healthcare team if needed

For emotional health, you can help your loved one:

- Keep watch for signs of depression and anxiety
- Be in touch with family and friends
- Find online or local support groups
- Find a counselor or therapist
- Contact their spiritual advisor

Financial concerns for you

Caregivers sometimes need to take unpaid time off work. Some even need to quit their job. They often spend their own money on care expenses. These issues can cause money problems. Talk with your employer about the Family Medical Leave Act and employee assistance programs. Ask the hospital and healthcare team for information about financial help.

Taking care of yourself

Helping someone recover from cancer is a stressful task. You may worry about your loved one's physical and mental health. You may worry about money issues. You may feel powerless to help in some ways. And you may be unsure what your role is now. These kinds of worries cause stress. They can lead to depression and anxiety. To keep yourself healthy, make sure to:

- Eat a healthy diet.
- Get regular physical activity.
- Protect yourself from the sun.
- Keep your social life active.
- Get a flu shot every year.
- Don't smoke.
- Limit alcohol.
- Get enough sleep.
- Get regular check-ups and screening tests.
- Write in a journal to help express your feelings about what you've been going through.
- Talk with your healthcare provider if you need help with any of these.

Getting support

While you are a caregiver, you need support, too. Make sure to:

- Contact the healthcare team if you feel unsure or stressed
- Talk with a counselor or other therapist if you need to
- Get help from your family and friends

Also, ask the healthcare team:

- How to get help from state or federal programs
- What other community or hospital resources may help with caregiving

You can also connect with other caregivers and find support from:

- [American Cancer Society](#)
- [Cancer Care](#)
- [National Cancer Institute](#)

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