

FEATURE STORY

After Treatment: Back to 'Normal'

Strategies help patients adjust to life after treatment

During those months of fighting cancer, that final day of treatment can beckon as an enticing respite, a punctuation mark and, above all, a step back toward your pre-cancer life. Increasingly, though, clinicians are realizing that the reality can be far more complex logistically and emotionally, a transition—dubbed the re-entry phase—that can require months or years to navigate.

That final walk out of the doctor's office or clinic, with just checkups slated for your future, can be both thrilling and terrifying. Re-entry stress can show up in a number of ways. Newly minted survivors worry about cancer's recurrence, and at the same time they're often coping with the evaporation of their safety net—from those weekly phone calls and casseroles to the encouraging smiles of clinicians and nurses in the chemotherapy room. And, it can take months to physically feel like yourself again, or a reasonable facsimile.

At the same time, family roles and emotions, including those of the patient, may shift. Everyone has to adjust to the “new normal.”

Issues involving re-entry tend to be most acute during the first six months after treatment, but can extend considerably longer. As a rule, the longer the cancer experience—from the first suspicious symptom to the final treatment appointment—the longer the time needed to recover from the physical and emotional ripple effects.

Plus, the post-treatment picture can vary substantially depending upon the type of cancer and its long-term prognosis. Someone recovering from initial breast cancer treatment may still require ongoing hormonal treatment or follow-up surgery, such as reconstruction. Other survivors may enter a gray zone for other reasons, such as when it's more uncertain whether the malignancy has been eradicated.

Even those former patients with substantial reason for optimism may wrestle with frustrating logistics and limitations, particularly in the first few months after treatment. Family members and spouses may long to flip a switch to their pre-cancer existence. They may have grown weary of needing help from friends

and centering their lives on their loved one's cancer.

In other situations, patterns and habits may become difficult to break. The father, for example, may have grown accustomed to taking the lead where discipline is concerned while the mother is undergoing treatment.

Meanwhile, former patients may only have just begun sorting through their own emotions surrounding their cancer experience. They second-guess their aches and pains. They can exist in perpetual limbo, waiting for that next scan or blood test.

Experts say one of the biggest mistakes you can make during the re-entry phase is to isolate yourself. Share the experience and your ongoing frustrations, whether you talk to a support group, a counselor, or a trusted loved one. Don't be shy about asking loved ones for continued assistance, both with daily logistics and emotionally.

Today's survivors can benefit from numerous support groups, exercise classes, and other forums—in person and virtually—that didn't exist decades ago. In recent years, the oncology community also has moved more aggressively to address the post-treatment gap. In the wake of the 2005 Institute of Medicine report on cancer survivorship, treatment summaries and survivorship plans are being offered more frequently to assist patients with the transition.

Beyond coping with emotional stress, recently treated survivors will also need to rebuild themselves physically, get better sleep, focus on good nutrition, and regain physical strength. It's a lot to juggle, along with the expectations of loved ones. Warn loved ones that recovery can be erratic, with good days and bad. Above all, take time to transition back to your previous life.

Sometimes, the transition to a "new normal" can allow survivors to re-examine their life choices. Whether survivors scale a mountain, reconnect with a favorite pastime or shrug off stereotypes, there's no denying that facing down cancer elicits a need to find meaning and confront challenges.

Cancer survivors may feel a need to give back to society by volunteering, or they may seek out existential meaning. For others, cancer is liberating, allowing them to muster the courage to end unhealthy relationships or to take the trip they've always dreamed about. But for most, it's an opportunity to look at what they want to do for the rest of their lives, regardless of how long that might be.