

## CONTENTS

# Choosing a Counselor

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*How do I decide?*

Patients are often unaware of the help a social worker or counselor can provide in proactively dealing with potential problems. “One of the things I frequently hear is, ‘How come we didn’t know about you earlier?’” says social worker Catherine Bailey, CSW. “I think making a referral early on helps alert people to the strains and stressors that come with cancer,” including talking about depression, anxiety, financial problems, support needs and issues within the family or workplace.

“It’s important to find someone who can do an early psychosocial assessment,” says Bailey. “Patients are going through emotional challenges and psychological changes, and it’s important that those things are addressed.”

While patient education centers and other support services are more widely available than in the past, fewer than half of cancer patients use the services. Results of a recent survey published in *Psycho-Oncology* showed that most cancer survivors did not take advantage of counseling services either because they felt they already had adequate support (32 percent), didn’t know support services existed (25 percent) or didn’t receive a recommendation from their doctor (13 percent). Studies have also shown that older patients are less interested in support services and psychosocial issues than their younger counterparts.

The first step in choosing a professional counselor is determining the type of services needed. Survivors can choose from individual, family or couple counseling or join a support group that is led by a trained professional, such as a psychiatrist, social worker or marriage counselor. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialize in mental disorders and can prescribe medicine for depression and anxiety. Psychologists are trained in human behavior counseling and can provide individual or group therapy. Social workers who are licensed in clinical social work can provide individual or group counseling. Social workers or psychologists may also have specialized training in family and marriage counseling.

Survivors should choose a counselor experienced in their area of concern, such as marital problems, depression or guilt. Survivors can get referrals from social workers, oncology nurses, support groups or patient education centers. It’s normal to talk with several counselors or different types of counselors before choosing what’s right for you. A quick phone call to discuss your situation and how they may help you could narrow your choices.

Often hospitals, cancer centers and nonprofit organizations provide social work

counseling for free. Health insurance policies usually cover a set number of professional sessions for mental health issues, such as depression. Look at your health insurance coverage for recommended counselors and what it offers. You may need a referral for some plans. Your workplace may also offer free or discounted counseling services that are confidential.

## **Resources**

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American Psychosocial Oncology Society  
866-276-7443 [www.apos-society.org](http://www.apos-society.org)

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CancerCare  
800-813-4673 [www.cancercares.org](http://www.cancercares.org)

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AMC Cancer Information and Counseling Line  
800-525-3777 [www.amc.org](http://www.amc.org)