

# After Treatment: Fear of Recurrence

*Taking control of the uncertainty that cancer may return*

Patients undergoing treatment worry if therapy will be effective and cure their disease. But a different kind of worry—fear of the cancer returning—rears its ugly head at the completion of therapy when, after an extended period, your medical team is no longer at the forefront.

Although it may never go away, fear of recurrence should diminish over time, especially if you have a positive experience of being a survivor and a well person. Managing fear is essential when external stimuli, known as triggers, feed anxiety. Some common triggers include a relative or friend being diagnosed, aches and pains previously associated with cancer, media coverage of cancer, and follow-up appointments. Having to revisit those emotions during doctor's visits can sometimes cause survivors to avoid necessary follow-up testing. But for others, fear becomes part of an action plan, motivating survivors to seriously look at maintaining a proper diet and healthy lifestyle.

Helpful coping strategies include calming self-statements, imagery, and distraction. Talk to family, friends, doctors, or nurses about your fear. Writing in a journal provides the setting for a personal monologue in which issues behind the fear can be explored as well as ways to overcome it.

Creating a “worry list” may also be helpful. Here's how it works:

**Make a list of the things you worry about** and include specific examples. You will begin to see that many of the things you worry about look different on paper, and you may begin to question how realistic these worries are. Even the task of putting your specific concerns down on paper may release some of their power over you.

**Write down every recollection** you have of when your worries actually materialized in some concrete way. As you scan your notes, you're likely to find the number of times you had a “false alarm” greatly outnumber the times your worry became reality.

**Every day at about the same time**, take out your list and go over it, carefully noting how, since the day before, nothing you worried about has actually happened. Allow a specific amount of time for this activity and cut down the time you allow for your “worry list” review each week until you only devote one minute to it each day.

**Seek out someone you know** who is dealing with cancer and share this approach with them. By showing others that worry is a drain on energy, you may lift their

spirits as well.

Sometimes people become so fearful that they fall into despair. If you feel overwhelmed by fear, it is time to get help from a mental health professional. Symptoms of fear that may indicate a need for mental health care include anger and irritability, difficulty with concentration and problem solving, and physical symptoms, such as muscle tension, dry mouth, trembling, shaking, or restlessness. Changes in appetite or sleep can be important symptoms that indicate a need for help. Some people find that medication is appropriate in helping them get through the most stressful periods.