

# Treat Your Whole Self, Not Just Your Cancer Cells

When you are diagnosed with cancer, the primary concern for you and your doctor is getting rid of the cancer. That is obviously the most crucial aspect of your doctor's role, but it is only one part of caring for you. As a cancer patient, you need care as a "whole person," which includes the emotional challenges that come with a cancer diagnosis and the life challenges that have an impact on your quality of care—and quality of life.

## Emotional Support

Coping with cancer can be a difficult journey, emotionally as well as physically. Stress and strain and some degree of anxiety or depression are common for cancer patients and their caregivers. People with cancer can benefit from having an assessment of their emotional adjustment to the diagnosis. Be sure to ask your doctor or nurse to evaluate your symptoms to determine if you would benefit from psychosocial support and/or medical interventions geared to dealing with those symptoms.

If your health care team does not ask about your emotional well-being, do not hesitate to raise the issue yourself. Addressing your psychological needs is an essential part of providing quality care and improving your overall health.

Most cancer treatment facilities have specialists in psychosocial oncology available. These may be psychologists, psychiatrists, or social workers experienced in negotiating the challenges cancer brings to patients' lives. Most doctors who treat cancer also work with such professionals, as well as with nurses, chaplains, and counselors experienced in managing cancer-related issues.

Working with a mental health professional usually involves a series of private conversations to discuss your feelings about your cancer and how it affects your life, accompanied or followed by a variety of treatment approaches that may include counseling sessions, relaxation exercises, and medication according to your specific needs.

You may also consider joining a support group, which can provide information, emotional support, coping skills, and a way of reducing anxiety and fear. Support groups, conducted in

person and online, have helped many people with cancer gain the support and strength they need to cope with the disease. Additionally, research has shown that patient support groups improve the quality of life for many people.

### **Social and Practical Needs**

Many in the healthcare professions understand that dealing with cancer treatment and the life challenges it presents can be just as difficult as fighting the disease itself. For example, you can't get first-rate health care if you don't have transportation to your appointments. You won't take the prescription medications you need if you can't afford them. And you can't return to health—and a high quality of life—if you are unable to take care of your daily personal needs, like bathing, preparing meals, and performing household chores.

Fortunately, many organizations—government, nonprofit, religious, and community volunteer groups—are available to help cancer survivors meet these important needs. Often the services are free. If you need help and don't know how to find it, ask your health care team or the oncology social worker at your treatment center for advice and referrals.

### **Advocate for Yourself**

Don't assume that family members, friends, caregivers, or even your health care team know what you think, feel, or need. A key component of getting treatment for yourself as a “whole person” is self-advocacy—speaking up for what you need in order to cope with the physical and psychological effects of cancer and its treatment, and to live your day-to-day life.



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## Resources:

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“Cancer Care for the Whole Patient: Meeting Psychosocial Health Needs—Resources,”  
[www.iom.edu/Object.File/Master/47/604/Whole%20Cancer%20Resource%20List%20and%20Role%20Models.pdf](http://www.iom.edu/Object.File/Master/47/604/Whole%20Cancer%20Resource%20List%20and%20Role%20Models.pdf)

NATIONAL COALITION OF CANCER SURVIVORSHIP

“Resource Guide”  
[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/guide/](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/guide/)

“Self-Advocacy: A Cancer Survivor’s Handbook”  
[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/publications/advocacy.pdf](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/publications/advocacy.pdf)

“Treatment Issues: Pain”  
[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/pain/](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/pain/)

“Treatment Issues: Side effects”  
[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/side-effects/](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/side-effects/)

“Helping with Emotional Issues”

[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/special-topics/caregiving/emotional.html](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/special-topics/caregiving/emotional.html)

“Issues of the Heart and Mind”

[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/heart-mind/](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/heart-mind/)

“You Have the Right to Be Hopeful”

[www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/publications/hopeful.pdf](http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/publications/hopeful.pdf)

THE WELLNESS COMMUNITY

[www.thewellnesscommunity.org](http://www.thewellnesscommunity.org)  
Information about support and education for people affected by cancer.

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