

Coping With a New Cancer Diagnosis

Sarah Rosenbloom, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor

Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences

Director, Sarah Rosenbloom Ph.D. & Associates

Cancer Connections

November 12, 2016

Cancer... What???



- **Once the shock wears off, the process of making changes begins. You may have to rearrange things in your life as you start treatment.**
- **Symptoms may take a toll on both your body and your emotions.**
- **You may have to learn new ways of talking to your loved ones and to your health care team.**
- **You may have a lot of questions to ask about adjusting to all the new issues that cancer brings.**
- **It can seem overwhelming at first, but knowing what to expect may help you feel more at ease.**

Emotions and Cancer



The Rollercoaster



Common Feelings

Overwhelmed

- When you first learn that you have cancer, you may feel as if your life is out of control. This could be because:
 - You wonder if you're going to live.
 - Your normal routine is disrupted by doctor visits and treatments.
 - People speak in medical language that you don't understand.
 - You feel like you can't do the things you enjoy.
 - You feel helpless and lonely.



Anger

- It's normal to ask, "Why me?" and be angry.
- You may also feel anger or resentment towards
 - Health care providers
 - Healthy friends
 - Loved ones
 - God
- Anger often comes from feelings that are hard to show:
 - Fear, anxiety, panic
 - Frustration
 - Helplessness
- Anger can be helpful in that it may motivate you to take action



Hope and Gratitude

- Millions of people who have had cancer are alive today
- Your chances of living with cancer—and living beyond it—are better now than they have ever been before
- People with cancer can lead very active lives, even during treatment
- Some people see their cancer as a "wake-up call."
- Realizing the importance of enjoying little things in life
- Renewed motivation to go places or do things
- Spending more time with friends and family
- Mending broken relationships



Fear and Worry

- You may be afraid or worried about:
 - Being in pain, either from the cancer or the treatment
 - Feeling sick or looking different as a result of your treatment
 - Taking care of your family
 - Paying your bills or keeping your job
 - Dying
- Some fears about cancer are based on stories, rumors, or misinformation.



Stress and Anxiety

- **Extra worry, inability to relax, feeling tense. You may notice that:**
 - **Your heart beats faster.**
 - **You have headaches or muscle pains.**
 - **You don't feel like eating. Or you eat more.**
 - **You feel sick to your stomach or have diarrhea.**
 - **You feel shaky, weak, or dizzy.**
 - **You have a tight feeling in your throat and chest.**
 - **You sleep too much or too little.**
 - **You find it hard to concentrate.**
- **Common signs of stress, but also could be due to medicines or treatment.**
- **Stress can keep your body from healing as well as it should.*****

Sadness and Depression

- Normal response to any serious illness
- Losses
 - Of health
 - Of life/lifestyle before illness
 - Of control
 - Of future plans
- Common symptoms include
 - Distraction
 - Fatigue, lethargy
 - Tearfulness
 - Lack of appetite
 - Usually improves over time



When Depression or Anxiety Gets in the Way

Emotional Signs:

- Feelings of sadness that don't go away
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feeling nervous or shaky
- Having a sense of guilt or feeling unworthy
- Feeling short-tempered, moody
- Feeling helpless or hopeless, as if life has no meaning
- Having a hard time concentrating, feeling scatterbrained
- Crying for long periods of time or many times each day
- Focusing on worries and problems
- No interest in the hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- Finding it hard to enjoy everyday things, such as food or being with family and friends
- Thinking about hurting yourself or ending your life



When Depression or Anxiety Gets in the Way

Physical Signs:

- Unintended weight gain or loss not due to illness or treatment
- Sleep problems, such as not being able to sleep, having nightmares, or sleeping too much
- Racing heart, dry mouth, increased perspiration, upset stomach, diarrhea
- Changes in energy level
- Fatigue that doesn't go away
- Headaches, other aches and pains



Guilt

- You may blame yourself for upsetting the people you love
- Worry about being a burden in some way
- Feeling sad/ashamed of not being able to enjoy others' positive events
- You may blame yourself for lifestyle choices that you think could have led to your cancer

“When I start to feel guilty that I caused my illness, I think of how little kids get cancer. That makes me realize that cancer can just happen. It isn't my fault.”

-Becky

Loneliness

- You may be less able to take part in the hobbies and activities you used to enjoy
- You may feel that no one understands what you're going through
- Loved ones may have a hard time dealing with cancer and may not visit or call as often
- Others may minimize your situation or how you feel
- You may not know anyone else who has gone through what you are going through
- Often loved ones mean well, but they may not know what to say or how to act...



Well-Meaning but...

cloud

YOU'RE GOING TO BE JUST FINE!

www.TheSilverPen.com
CLOUDS AND SILVER LININGS DURING BREAST CANCER

Silver Lining

I'LL BE HERE TO SUPPORT YOU DURING YOUR TREATMENT.

www.TheSilverPen.com
CLOUDS AND SILVER LININGS DURING BREAST CANCER



cloud

AFTER YOUR
DOUBLE
MASTECTOMY AND
RECONSTRUCTION,
AT LEAST YOU
WILL HAVE PERKY
BREASTS WHEN
YOU'RE 85.

www.TheSilverPen.com

CLOUDS AND SILVER LININGS DURING BREAST CANCER



Silver Lining

HOW DO YOU
FEEL ABOUT
YOUR
UPCOMING
SURGERY?

www.TheSilverPen.com

CLOUDS AND SILVER LININGS DURING BREAST CANCER

Coping Strategies

Get Informed

- Most – but not all – people feel less afraid when they learn more about what to expect
- Some studies suggest that people who are well-informed about their illness and treatment are more likely to follow their treatment plans and recover from cancer more quickly than those who are not
- Write down your questions and concerns beforehand and bring them with you
- If possible bring a family member or friend to help you remember what you hear
- How much DO you want to know about your cancer?
 - Wanting all the facts and details, to be very involved in decision-making
 - Preferring to learn just the basics and leave most decisions to their doctors
 - Think about which approach works best for you and let your health care team know what you'd prefer

Anticipate Possible Physical Changes

- **Now — after your cancer diagnosis and before you begin treatment — is the best time to plan for changes.**
- **Ask your doctor what changes you should anticipate. If drugs will cause hair loss, advice from experts about clothing, makeup, wigs and hairpieces may help you feel more comfortable.**
- **Insurance often helps pay for wigs, prostheses and other adaptive devices.**
- **Consider how treatment will impact your daily activities. Ask your doctor whether you can expect to continue your normal routine. You may need to spend time in the hospital or have frequent medical appointments.**
- **If your treatment will require a leave of absence from your normal duties, make arrangements for this.**

Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

There's no time like the present!

- Choose a healthy diet consisting of a variety of foods
- Get adequate rest with good sleep hygiene
- Exercise
 - Recent data suggest that people who maintain some physical exercise during treatment not only cope better but may also live longer
 - Natural anti-depressant
- Limit alcohol and caffeine
- Participating in enjoyable activities may help



Try to Maintain Your Normal Lifestyle

(As much as possible)

- Regular routines and habits are important to maintaining identity and sense of self
- Take one day at a time. It's easy to overlook this simple strategy during stressful times
- Try to keep in contact with others in your life
- When the future is uncertain, regular responsibilities, organizing and planning may suddenly seem overwhelming – do what you can



Let Friends and Family Help You

- Often friends and family can run errands, provide transportation, prepare meals and help you with household chores
- Learn to accept their help. Accepting help gives those who care about you a sense of making a contribution at a difficult time.
- Also encourage your family to accept help if it's needed. A cancer diagnosis affects the entire family and adds stress, especially to the primary caregivers. Accepting help with meals or chores from neighbors or friends can go a long way in preventing caregiver burnout.

Express How You Feel

Don't Try to Be Upbeat if You're Not

- Many find that when they express strong feelings like anger or sadness, they're more able to let go of them
- Look for emotional support in different ways. Talk to friends or family, other cancer survivors, a support group, a therapist, or spiritual leader
- If you prefer not to discuss your cancer with others, you can still sort out your feelings by thinking about them or writing them down



Who Can I Talk To About Cancer?

- Supportive Oncology Program at RHLCCC
 - Support Groups for patients and caregivers
 - Individual Services
- Gilda's Club of Chicago – free activities, groups and programs designed to improve support and coping
- Other cancer survivors can give you insight into your specific diagnosis or treatment:
 - Imerman's Angels: <http://imermanangels.org/>
- A friend or family member who has had cancer
- American Cancer Society's Cancer Survivors Network: <https://csn.cancer.org/>
- Cancer Care national online network for emotional, physical and financial resources: <http://www.cancercare.org/>



What Can I Control?



- Being involved in healthcare
- Making positive changes in lifestyle
- Start new, less physically active activities and hobbies that you can do anywhere like art, photography, reading, music or crafts. Coloring books!
- Organize parts of life that you can
- Set a daily schedule
- Review your goals and priorities, and find time for the activities that are most important to you and give you the most meaning

“I have good days and bad days. But I try to let there be more good ones than bad, and focus on things in my life that I can control. I try to enjoy family, friends, and the little things in life.”

-Louise

Spiritual Healing



Denial Can be Good For You



NILE RIVER

*“It’s always been hard for me to tell the difference between denial
and what used to be known as hope.”*

-Michael Chabon, novelist

Find Ways to Help Yourself Relax

Old or New

- **Whatever activity helps you unwind, you should take time to do it**
- **May need modifications: such as Running -> Yoga**
- **Meditation, relaxation or imagery exercises may help**
 - **May require practice**
 - **Classes, CDs, online**

Get Ready, Get Set, RELAX

Getting Started

- For each exercise, find a quiet place where you can rest undisturbed. Let others know you need time for yourself. Make the setting peaceful for you. For example, dim the lights and find a comfortable chair or couch.
- You may find that your mind wanders, which is normal. When you notice yourself thinking of something else, gently direct your attention back to your body. Be sure to maintain your deep breathing.
- Some people like to listen to slow, calming music while practicing these exercises.

National Cancer Institute

<https://www.cancer.gov>

Posted: February 29, 2016

Breathing and Muscle Tensing

- **Get into a comfortable position. Close your eyes and clear your mind of distractions. If you're lying down, you may want to put a small pillow under your neck and knees.**
- **Breathe deeply, at a slow and relaxing pace. Concentrate on breathing deeply and slowly, raising your belly with each breath, rather than just your chest.**
- **Next, go through each of your major muscle groups, tensing (squeezing) them for a few seconds and then letting go. Start at the top of your head and work your way down. Tense and relax your face and jaws, then shoulders and arms.**
- **Continue tensing and relaxing each muscle group as you go down (chest, lower back, buttocks, legs), ending with your feet. Focus completely on releasing all the tension from your muscles and notice the differences you feel when they are relaxed.**

National Cancer Institute
<https://www.cancer.gov>

Posted: February 29, 2016

Slow Rhythmic Breathing

- Stare at an object or shut your eyes and think of a peaceful scene. Take a slow, deep breath.
- As you breathe in, tense your muscles. As you breathe out, relax your muscles and feel the tension leaving.
- Remain relaxed and begin breathing slowly and comfortably, taking about 9-12 breaths a minute. To maintain a slow, even rhythm, you can silently say to yourself, "In, one, two. Out, one, two."
- If you ever feel out of breath, take a deep breath and continue the slow breathing.
- Each time you breathe out, feel yourself relaxing and going limp. Continue the slow, rhythmic breathing for up to 10 minutes.
- To end the session, count silently and slowly from one to three.

National Cancer Institute
<https://www.cancer.gov>

Posted: February 29, 2016

Imagery

- Usually works best with your eyes closed.
- To begin, create an image in your mind. You may want to think of a place or activity that made you happy in the past. Explore this place or activity. Notice how calm you feel.
- Breathe slowly and deeply. As you breathe in, say silently and slowly to yourself, “In, one, two,” and as you breathe out, say “Out, one, two.”
- If you have pain, you may imagine yourself as a person without pain. In your image, you can cut the wires that send pain signals from one part of your body to another. Or you may imagine healing energy forming and taking shape in any part of your body.
- When you’re ready, imagine that the air you breathe in blows this energy to the area where you feel pain. Once there, the energy heals and relaxes you.
- As you breathe out, imagine the air blowing the energy away from your body. As it floats away, all of your pain goes with it.
- Repeat the last two steps each time you breathe in and out.

Develop Your Own Coping Strategy

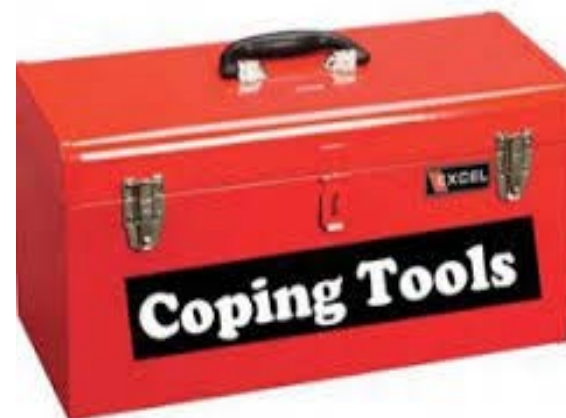
Just as each person's cancer treatment is individualized, so is the coping strategy you use



Strengths and Skills You Might Forget

What helped you through rough times before your cancer diagnosis is likely to help ease your worries now, whether that's:

- Any of the above
- A close friend
- A loved one
- A therapist
- A religious leader
- A favorite, meaningful activity that recharges you



Turn to these comforts now, as well as be open to trying new ones

Additional Resources

- **Diagnosis: Cancer: Your Guide to the First Months of Healthy Survivorship (Revised Edition) (Harpham, 2003)**
- **After Cancer: A Guide to Your New Life (Harpham, 1995)**
- **The Human Side of Cancer: Living with Hope, Coping with Uncertainty (Holland & Lewis, 2001)**
- **The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness (Groopman, 2005)**
- **When Life Becomes Precious: The Essential Guide for Patients, Loved Ones, and Friends of Those Facing Serious Illnesses (Babcock, 1997)**
- **How to Help Children Through a Parent's Serious Illness: Supportive, Practical Advice from a Leading Child Life Specialist (McCue & Bonn, 2011)**
- **The Posttraumatic Growth Workbook: Coming Through Trauma Wiser, Stronger, and More Resilient (Tedeschi & Moore, coming 12/1/16)**



Questions?

Thank You

S-rosenbloom@northwestern.edu
www.sarahrosenbloomphd.com