

Tackling the Fear of Recurrence

The end of cancer treatment is often met with mixed emotions - relief to finally be able to move beyond treatment and apprehension that the cancer may come back in the future. If thoughts



about cancer returning cause you to be fearful, that is called “fear of recurrence”.

This issue is intended to help you become aware of the facts, understand your thoughts and feelings and provide resources

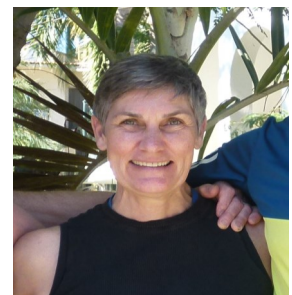
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Cancer Recurrence

An article by Myrna Tracy, MSW, RSW

Cancer survivors may feel relief and fear at the same time. It can be a very uncomfortable feeling to live with. People who have survived cancer may feel that the threat of cancer coming back is always with them. In fact, fear of recurrence may be the most common fear of a cancer survivor (Vickberg, 2003). The intensity of the fear may lessen over time (Henderson, 1997). There is research that says a person who thinks more about the appointment when they were given their initial diagnosis, worry more about cancer later on (Mathews, et. al., 2002). Continued...



Myrna Tracy has worked as a Medical Social Worker since 1986. In 2015 she retired as the Professional Practice Leader for Patient & Family Counselling Department at the Centre in Kelowna and continues to work as a casual counsellor.

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Fear of recurrence increases at the time of follow-up exams and during times of illnesses. Just attending any medical appointments can trigger worry. Individuals worried about cancer returning may consult health care providers often for reassurance.

The opposite is also true, they may avoid all contact because it reminds them of their vulnerability. Unfortunately, this approach may “back fire” in that the individual may worry even more when they don’t have regular medical appointments.

Fear of recurrence can affect anyone who has had cancer, but there are some people who may be more at risk of experiencing higher levels of worry and distress.

What to expect:

Fear of recurrence is normal and usually happens when:

- new or previous symptoms occur
- waiting for test results or procedures
- previous to scheduled appointments
- a family or friend is diagnosed with cancer
- anniversary dates such as the date of cancer diagnosis

When to get help:

- if thoughts and feelings persist and affect your sense of well-being and ability to cope
- new problems such as intrusive thoughts that keep you from sleeping, feeling hungry, reaching out to friends and family, and not able to enjoy activities that you used to enjoy

Who can help:

A good place to start is talking to your family doctor who can refer you if necessary.

Connect with:

- Counsellor
- Support group
- Peer support
- Spiritual support





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Research tells us that younger survivors and those with more treatment side effects (such as pain and fatigue) are more likely to have greater worries about cancer coming back. Research also shows that people who don't feel well supported, or have unmet needs, are more likely to experience fear of recurrence that significantly affects their life. Unmet needs might be things like not getting social support from friends and family, or not getting the right medical information in a way that lets you feel informed about your condition and treatment.

HOW CAN I REDUCE MY FEAR OF CANCER RECURRENCE?

Having the following supports throughout your treatment for cancer and beyond may make you less likely to experience high levels of fear that the cancer may return:

- **social support** – having someone to talk to or to keep you company when you need it
- **financial support** – having enough money to cover your expenses
- **employment** – being part of a workplace that helps you look after yourself
- **medical information** – understanding your medical condition and treatment
- **transport** – being able to get to and from the places you need to be easily
- **sexuality** – being able to get help and support for any sexual problems caused by your cancer treatment
- **home environment** - making your home suitable for your changing needs

Used with permission of the Breast Cancer Network of Australia. Accessed on December 7, 2017 from <https://www.bcna.org.au/media/4167/bcna-fact-sheet-fear-of-cancer-recurrence-jan-2017.pdf>



Provincial Health Services Authority

RESOURCES

BC Cancer—Support Programs can help with fears and worries

5 QUESTION

CHECK IN:

(Useful after treatment)

- What's happening with my body?
- How am I feeling emotionally?
- When I let my thoughts wander, what do I find myself thinking about?
- Who did I connect with today?
- What gave me a sense of peace?

Picking Up The Pieces: Moving forward after surviving cancer, Magee and Scalzo, 2006 Rutgers University Press

- Mindfulness and/or Relaxation Groups are offered at Centres. Drop-in or pre-registration may be required
- Art Therapy Sessions: offered during the year at some Centres. Call your Centre, Patient & Family Counselling to enquire.
- Wellness Group at Vancouver Cancer Centre: pre-registration is required call 604.877.6000 ext. 672194
- Therapeutic Touch Clinic is offered at Vancouver Island Centre— pre-register call 250.519.5525

Call Patient & Family Counselling at your cancer centre or go to the BC Cancer website —Our Services—Cancer Centre—Support Programs for a monthly calendar.

Coming in January 2018!

Pre-register for upcoming online group for managing the fear of recurrence!

Facilitated by professional counsellors with Cancer Chat Canada

Register online at

<https://cancerchat.desouzainstitute.com/>

or call 1-844-725-2476