

Massachusetts General Hospital BMT Survivorship Program

Fear of Recurrence

One of the most common concerns that cancer survivors have is worrying the cancer will come back (recurrence). The fear of recurrence is very real and entirely normal. Anxious thoughts like “has the cancer come back? And “what will happen if it does?” may be triggered by the appearance of a bruise, headache, or fatigue. These thoughts may come along with events such as your diagnosis anniversary or follow-up appointments and tests. For some survivors, these worries and feelings of uncertainty lead to struggles with depression and anxiety. It is important to remember that although you cannot directly control whether the cancer returns, you can control how much the fear of recurrence affects your life.

Helpful tips on how to cope with the fear of recurrence:

- *Talk with your doctor:* Although it is difficult to think about, every survivor needs to prepare themselves for the possibility that the cancer might come back. However, there is also no need to worry yourself unnecessarily. That is why getting accurate information about the risk of recurrence for your type of cancer is extremely important. A health care professional familiar with your medical history can give you information about the chance the cancer might come back and what symptoms to look for.
- *Recognize your emotions:* Don't hide or ignore “negative” feelings like fear and anxiety. Ignoring them can make you feel more overwhelmed. It helps to talk about fears and feelings with a trusted friend, family member, or mental health professional. Or you can try writing down your thoughts in a journal or a blog or on social media.
- *Accept your fears:* Telling yourself not to worry or criticizing yourself for being afraid won't make these feelings go away. Accept that you are going to experience some fear, and focus on ways to manage the anxiety.
- *Take care of yourself:* Healthy habits like eating nutritious meals, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep help people feel better both physically and emotionally. You may also feel like you have more control over your health if you choose to avoid unhealthy habits, like smoking or drinking alcohol, that have been linked to increased risk of cancer recurrence.
- *Look for the positive:* Sometimes this means looking for the good even in a bad time or trying to be hopeful instead of thinking the worst. Try to use your energy to focus on wellness and what you can do now to stay as healthy as possible.
- *Realize that you don't have to be upbeat all the time:* Many people say they want to have the freedom to give in to their feelings sometimes. It is okay to do that sometimes.

- *Be as active as you can:* Getting out of the house and doing something can help you focus on other things besides cancer and the worries it brings.
- *Reduce stress:* Findings ways to manage your stress will help lower your overall level of anxiety. Try different ways of reducing stress to find out what works best for you. This could include spending time with family and friends, rediscovering old hobbies, doing activities that you enjoy, taking a walk, mediating, enjoying a bath, exercising or laughing at a funny book or movie.
- *Look at what you can control:* Some people say that putting their lives in order helps. Being involved in your health care, keeping your appointments, and making changes in your lifestyle are among the things you can control.

Mass General Resources

BMT Social Workers

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