

Dating and New Relationships

How is dating affected by the cancer experience?

Many survivors find themselves dating during their survivorship. You may have been single when you went through treatment. You may have broken up with the person you were dating during your treatment, or your partner may have passed away. You may want to start dating again and begin a new, romantic relationship with someone. Survivors often find that dating after cancer is different than dating before cancer.

If you feel like your cancer experience has changed you, it's possible that you will feel differently about dating and starting new relationships. You may find it easier than before or harder than before. It really depends on how you feel about yourself and how you feel about sharing with others. If you are having a hard time dating after cancer, it may help to know that many survivors have shared the same struggles and have overcome their difficulties.

Why is dating after cancer harder for some survivors?

Dating, with or without cancer, is hard for many people. Relationships with friends have psychological, social and emotional parts to them. When it comes to dating, these parts can feel even more intense and complicated.

Cancer survivors sometimes have to deal with many issues in their life after cancer that can make dating more complicated. Survivors may struggle with their body image, live with uncertainty about the future and have a hard time accepting the changes cancer has caused in their lives. Dealing with all of these concerns on your own can be difficult. Trying to date someone and share your intimate thoughts and feelings with him or her can seem even more difficult.

Some reasons why you might have a hard time dating after cancer:

- You feel unattractive, embarrassed or angry about changes in your body or physical appearance.
- You feel that your social skills aren't as good as others your age, especially if you received treatment as a child or young adult, a time when most people develop social skills.
- You feel like you won't be a good partner because you can't have children.
- You worry how others may react to knowing you are a cancer survivor.
- You worry about what your future will be like and whether the person you are dating can give you the emotional support you need.
- You have changed a lot since you were diagnosed, and you aren't sure how to express who you are now to others.

Why is dating after cancer easier for some survivors?

Some survivors feel that being a cancer survivor makes dating and starting new relationships easier.

Some reasons why you might find dating easier after cancer:

- You feel that your cancer experience has made you stronger and wiser and that these qualities will make you happier in your relationships.
- You feel that being a cancer survivor makes you special and that you have more to offer in a relationship.
- You appreciate relationships with people more.
- You view dating after cancer as one of the challenges that cancer brings and want to face it a positive way.

How can a survivor tell if s/he is having a difficult time dating after cancer?

For some survivors, it is obvious to them that they are struggling with dating after cancer. Sometimes survivors just feel generally unhappy and eventually realize that their unhappiness has something to do with dating.

Some questions that may help you figure out how you feel about dating include:

- How important is dating or being in a relationship to you?
- How much do you think about dating?
- What kinds of thoughts and feelings do you get when you think about dating or relationships?
- How do you feel when you date someone?

These questions may not help you find the reasons why dating is hard for you, but they can help you understand how important it is to you now. If the answers to these questions suggest that dating is hard for you, it may help to talk about your feelings with friends, family members or a professional counselor.

How many dates should a survivor go on before telling someone that s/he is a survivor?

Many survivors have said that one of the most challenging things about dating after cancer is knowing when to tell someone they are a cancer survivor. Survivors who are dating the same person they were dating when they were diagnosed probably won't have to explain as much because their partner went through the experience with them. But if you are beginning a new relationship, determining the right time to tell someone about your cancer experience can be very stressful.

Some ways to tell the people you date that you are a survivor include:

- You wait to tell them because you want to get to know them better before you share something that you feel is very personal.
- You tell them right away to get it over with and see how they react.
- You take things on a case-by-case basis and tell people you are dating when the moment feels right.

Most survivors agree that no one else can decide for you when to tell someone. Many feel that it is better to know earlier than later, especially before the relationship gets serious. You have to decide for yourself when you are most comfortable telling someone that you are a survivor.

What are some suggestions for survivors who are having a hard time dating?

Below is a brief list.

- Get involved in activities where you can meet people and practice your social skills.
- Go to a support group to talk about dating with other survivors.
- If thinking about dating overwhelms you and you want professional help, find a counselor.
- Keep a journal of your thoughts about dating after cancer.

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