

Finding Meaning

What does it mean to find meaning in your cancer experience?

Many would say that cancer does not end with treatment. The immediate illness may be in remission or cured, but you may find that your life has changed in unexpected ways. The changes that come with cancer are as different as the types of people who get and survive cancer. Some survivors think that finding meaning is one way to understand their cancer experience. When you try to find meaning in your cancer experience, it means you are trying to understand the greater purpose or reason behind your illness and what it means for your life now.

Not everyone has to find meaning in the cancer experience. Searching for a deeper meaning in your cancer experience may not be what you need. You may accept your survivorship without feeling a need to question it. Living life as you did before cancer may be the greatest comfort. A happy and fulfilling life does not require an ongoing search for meaning in every situation.

However, if searching for a greater understanding about what it means to be a cancer survivor is important to you, then you may benefit from trying to find meaning. There are ways you can explore the topic and learn more about meaning in your cancer experience.

What are some signs that a survivor is trying to find meaning?

You may feel that your life didn't change that much as a result of cancer. Or you may feel that your life has changed dramatically. A desire to find meaning doesn't necessarily depend on how much cancer affected you but on your needs and personality. If you question things about your cancer experience and try to understand its meaning in your life, you are probably trying to find meaning.

Some reasons why you might want to find meaning in your life after cancer:

- You may want to know or understand why you became ill or want to find the purpose of the illness.
- You think that cancer was a life-changing experience and want to understand more about the effect the illness had on your life.
- You are no longer interested in some parts of your life that were important to you before cancer. You want to find out who you are now.
- You might have had a set of goals that became impossible after cancer and treatment. A search for meaning may be one way to understand these life changes and find a way of healing.

Thinking too much about your cancer experience or how to find meaning may increase uncomfortable feelings and thoughts. You may want to spend a day or two thinking about the meaning in your cancer experience and then focus on other things for a while. The search for meaning doesn't have to be constant, and you don't have to find the meaning right away.

You may never truly understand your cancer experience, but thinking about it and trying to find meaning may make the experience seem less strange and overwhelming. If trying to find meaning overwhelms you emotionally, you might benefit from talking with a mental health professional.

Why does cancer cause some survivors to try to find meaning?

There are many things about the cancer experience that could lead you to question the meaning of cancer and how it changes your views on life in general.

Some of the reasons cancer causes people to try to find meaning:

- Cancer is a serious illness that, in some cases, can take your life
- Treatment can sometimes cause permanent changes to your body
- Your relationships may change
- Your interests may change
- Other people may see you differently now

Cancer and its treatment may sometimes leave you feeling frightened and unsure about the future. A search for meaning in the illness is one way to try to reduce fear and uncertainty in your life after cancer. Finding meaning may be your way of making sense out of life after cancer.

You may fear that cancer has completely changed your life. One of the greatest fears is that cancer will end life too soon. When treatment has ended successfully, you may view your life as life before cancer and life after cancer. You may have a sense that you have beaten death. When you feel like you have beaten death, you may have a strong need to understand why. This can lead to a desire to find meaning in your cancer experience.

When might a survivor try to find meaning?

You can begin to search for an understanding of your cancer experience at any point: at diagnosis, during treatment, after treatment and months, even years, after treatment has ended. This search can last through all stages or come and go. On the other hand, you may not ever feel the need to find a deeper meaning. A need to search for meaning in any situation at any particular time depends on your needs and interests.

The search for meaning may or may not have been a part of your initial response to being told you had cancer. You may have been too overwhelmed when you were first told you had cancer to try and find meaning in the experience. The many decisions that you had to

make about treatment could have crowded out other questions. With treatment completed, you might be settling into a routine. You may have more time to process what has happened and the questions about finding meaning that may come up.

What are some suggestions for survivors who want to find meaning in their life?

- Write your thoughts and feelings down in a journal.
- Understand what's important in your life.
- Talk to other survivors about their desires to find meaning in their cancer experience.
- Talk to a therapist if trying to find meaning causes depression, anxiety or overwhelms you in any way.

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