

Stress

What is stress?

You may feel overwhelmed by the changes cancer brings to your life. Many survivors feel this way. These changes often lead to stress. Stress is a feeling of constant worry or tension. If being a cancer survivor causes you to feel stressed, you probably feel overwhelmed or unsure about how to best manage your life after cancer.

Many cancer survivors remember feeling a lot of stress during their diagnosis and treatment. When you are diagnosed with cancer, the everyday stresses in home and work continue, but cancer and its treatment may create new worries and concerns. Most people don't realize that being a post-treatment cancer survivor may also cause stress in your life. Stress may come from worrying that the cancer will come back, trying to pay off medical bills and adjusting to life after cancer.

If you feel that stress is a big part of your life after having cancer, you may benefit from learning how to better manage stress. Experiencing stress will not bring your cancer back, but it can affect how well you feel. Feeling overwhelmed by stress can reduce the overall quality of your life and lead to other physical and emotional problems. Learning how to manage stress won't eliminate stress from your life, but it can improve how you feel during stressful times.

Is stress something that affects all survivors?

Stress affects many cancer survivors at one time or another during their survivorship. Each survivor, however, responds to stress in his or her own way. You may feel that cancer didn't bring any added stress to your life. If it did add stress, you may be able to handle the stress without much effort. However, it's perfectly understandable if you feel like the stress in your life overwhelms you at times.

You might benefit from learning how to manage stress if:

- You think about your cancer first thing every morning and last thing every night
- You are frightened or upset by minor aches and pains
- You think that cancer has changed your life too much and you can't figure out how to manage your life now
- You think that your family and friends do not understand you

What are some signs that stress may be affecting a survivor?

If you are experiencing a lot of stress in your life, you may notice physical side effects or changes in your behavior.

Some physical signs of stress are:

- Headaches
- Loss of appetite or eating too much
- Body aches and pains
- Pounding heart
- Grinding teeth
- Stomach/bowel problems
- Tense muscles

Some ways that stress might affect your behavior:

- Misuse of alcohol or drugs
- Mood swings
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Nightmares
- Worrying
- Becoming forgetful
- Difficulty sleeping

Because some of the physical symptoms may feel like signs of a recurrence of cancer, experiencing them can add even more stress to your life because you may worry that the cancer has come back. Discussing your symptoms with a member of your health care team can help determine whether or not they are stress related.

What is it about the cancer experience that causes stress?

Cancer can be scary. Before your diagnosis, you may not have known much about cancer or known how much it would change your life. There is a lot to learn and this can seem very overwhelming at times. When you are overwhelmed and feel like many things in your life are out of control, you may be experiencing stress.

When cancer treatment ends, some survivors worry because they are suddenly left without the constant attention and medical care they received from their health care team. This may also cause a lot of stress in your life. You might have a hard time expressing how much stress you feel because you think that once your treatment ends, cancer shouldn't affect you anymore. That is not true. It's important for you to realize that stress can be a very natural response for survivors who are trying to cope with life after cancer.

When might survivors notice more stress in their lives?

You may notice added stress in your life anytime you experience a significant change. There are changes you can experience during your survivorship that might cause added stress in your life. It's important to be aware of these times and do your best to manage the added stress as it comes.

Examples of changes that might cause survivors stress:

- When you finish treatment and start seeing your health care team less frequently
- When you change jobs and change insurance plans
- When you move to a new city and need to find a new health care team

Changes like the examples above may be very easy for you to handle. However, if they do cause you overwhelming worry and concern, you might want to consider how you can best manage the stress during those times. You may not be able to predict when the stressful times will come or how much impact they will have on your life. However, if you are able to identify the symptoms of stress as you experience them, you can take steps to manage stress before it becomes overwhelming.

Will survivors always feel stress?

For most people, there are some areas of daily life that cannot be changed. However, it's sometimes possible to find less stressful ways to fulfill your daily responsibilities. It's not always easy, but you might want to consider asking others for help. You might want to spend some time thinking about areas of your life that you can change to reduce your stress level. Changing small parts of your day may make a big difference in the amount of stress you experience.

It is almost impossible to completely eliminate stress from your life. There are stressful events in normal, everyday life. When you are concerned about your health, stress can increase. Because stress is unpredictable, you may find it helpful to think about ways you can manage stress before you actually have to deal with it. Not all stressful situations can be managed in the same way, but you may feel more confident knowing you have a place to start.

What can survivors do to manage stress?

- Do activities that help you relax.
- Find ways to sleep better when you are feeling stressed.
- Try meditating.
- Learn to say "no" to things you don't have to do.
- Try to have a few quiet and calming moments in every day possible.
- Look at how you handled stress in your life before cancer.
- Include healthy behaviors in your daily life.

Works Cited

Lance Armstrong Foundation Survivorship Topics
www.livestrong.org