

Telling Others You are a Survivor

Why is knowing when and how to tell others sometimes difficult for survivors?

During their survivorship, some survivors think about whether or not they want to tell people that they are cancer survivors. You may feel that your cancer experience is a big part of your life and that in order to know you people must know you are a survivor. Or you may think that cancer isn't a part of your life anymore and that there is no reason to tell others about it. Being a survivor means different things to different people, and there is no right or wrong way to feel about telling others you are a survivor.

Examples of times you may wonder if you should tell others you are a survivor:

- When you start a new job
- When you go to a new school
- When you start dating someone
- When a new friend or colleague is diagnosed with cancer
- When someone asks you about a scar or physical change caused by cancer

Some survivors find telling others helpful; others don't think that it's important for people to know. If you want to tell others you are a survivor but don't know how, there are things you can do that may help you become more comfortable telling others. Understanding the different ways to talk to others about your cancer experience can help make it less awkward. Sharing your experience might help you gain support during your survivorship.

What are some signs that a survivor is thinking about whether or not to tell others?

The same questions about whether to tell others that you are a survivor may cross your mind every time you meet someone new. People may ask you questions about your physical changes or cancer in general, and you will have to decide whether you want to tell them you are a survivor.

Survivors that worry about telling others may ask themselves:

- How do I introduce the new me?
- Do I tell them I am a cancer survivor? When?
- Will I scare them off?
- Will they feel sorry for me and see me as a victim?

You may decide that you don't want to tell others that you are a survivor. Although, if you have a physical change that happened during your treatment for cancer, people may ask you how it happened. Thinking about how you will respond to questions about your body or cancer before others ask may help you feel more prepared to answer their questions. Even strangers may ask about your appearance, and this can seem rude at times. However, some of these strangers may be survivors themselves, offering to lend their support.

Examples of physical changes caused by cancer treatment that people might ask you about:

- You had an arm or leg amputated
- You have visible scars
- You have visible markings from radiation

It is your decision whether you want to explain to them about your physical change and your cancer experience. Some days you may feel like telling the whole story, other times you may just want to tell the people who ask you that it's none of their business. You may go from one extreme to another – telling someone immediately or never bringing it up, feeling comfortable or feeling uncomfortable. You might respond in different ways to each new situation. Do what feels most comfortable to you in the moment.

What are some examples of times a survivor may think about whether to tell others?

- You and your family have been invited to stay with friends at their cabin this weekend. You are scheduled to have your yearly check-up the following Monday. Usually, you are very overwhelmed and anxious the weekend before your check-up and prefer to stay at home and relax. Do you tell the friends about your check-up or make up an excuse?
- You have a colleague at work with whom you now work closely on many projects, but you didn't know him very well during your treatment. He asked why you were away from work so much a few years ago. Does he need to know that it's because you had cancer?
- You recently made a new friend whom you like very much. You are meeting her for coffee and want to share your survivorship with her. Do you tell her? How? Will she be scared off? Will you lose this new friend?
- You recently started dating a new person. You really like her and are worried if you tell her you have cancer it might scare her off. How do you bring it up naturally? How do you explain your scars? How will she react?

You have to think about what response you are most comfortable with and decide at that particular time what you should or shouldn't tell the other person.

Preparing yourself for the conversation may help you feel more confident. You might not be able to predict when you will tell someone. It might just happen – that's OK. Each experience of cancer is as different as the people diagnosed with it. Each survivor who wants to tell others that s/he is a survivor may feel differently about the best time or the best way to tell others. You will decide what is right for you.

What are some of the reasons it can sometimes seem difficult to tell others?

There are many reasons why it can be difficult to tell others that you are a survivor. You may have your own personal reasons for not wanting to tell others. You may not want to tell others because you are worried about how they will react.

Some of the reasons you may not want to tell others:

- You may feel embarrassed talking about cancers of certain body parts, such as breast, anal or prostate cancers
- You may not feel like telling the whole story or answering a lot of questions about your cancer experience
- You may feel like your cancer experience is still too painful or upsetting to talk about
- You may feel like your cancer experience is personal, and you only want to share it with a few people

Some of the negative reactions you may worry about:

- They might feel sorry for you
- They may tell you stories about people they knew who didn't survive cancer
- They may tell you how you should feel or cope with your cancer
- They might just walk away

You may have told people in the past who reacted poorly, and you don't want that to happen again. Others' reactions to hearing that you are a cancer survivor may upset you. It may make you feel like you did something wrong. You did not do anything wrong. It's important to understand that no matter how well you tell others or no matter how long you wait, some people may react poorly. If you want to continue to share your story, it might make it easier if you try not to let other people's reactions bother you too much.

To make it easier on yourself and the people you tell, you might want to ask them to set aside some time so you can tell them something important. Then, you can share as little or as much as you want and allow them some time to understand what you are saying and ask any questions they may have.

Not everyone will react negatively. Some people who you thought would react negatively may surprise you and be understanding and open to hearing what you want to share. Telling someone that you are a survivor may give you another friend who can support you during the ups and downs of your survivorship.

What are some suggestions for survivors who want to feel more comfortable telling others?

- Write in a journal about how it feels to be a survivor.
- Practice telling others.
- Learn ways to respond to an unexpected response from another person.
- Talk to a mental health professional if worrying about telling others you are a survivor causes you anxiety, depression or other feelings that overwhelm you.

Works Cited

Lance Armstrong Foundation Survivorship Topics
www.livestrong.org

Sue P. Heiney, Joan F. Hermann, Katherine V. Bruss, et al (2001) American Cancer Society 2001 *Cancer in the Family: Helping Children Cope with a Parent's Illness*.