

The Emotional Side of Cancer

Breast cancer continues to be the most common cancer in women in the United States. According to the American Cancer Society, an estimated 192,370 new cases of breast cancer are diagnosed each year. Today there are about 2.5 million breast cancer survivors living in the United States. Therefore, it is important for us to recognize that October is National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. The goal is to raise awareness of the disease and to raise funds for research into its cause, prevention, and cure.

Although being educated about breast cancer, including its treatment and outcomes are important steps when diagnosed, it is equally important to recognize the emotional side of cancer. It is common to overlook this aspect of cancer since the diagnosis itself demands that you rapidly learn an overwhelming amount of medical information. However, since a diagnosis of cancer is perceived by the body and mind as a significant negative change, emotional distress is, in fact, the most common mental health issue. This is actually an adaptive coping mechanism that the body has designed to protect itself from harm or disequilibrium. Therefore, it is normal, and quite frankly natural, to feel worried, sad, confused, depressed and even angry that you have cancer. It is also normal and natural to want a way out of these feelings since the cancer itself is enough to deal with. The good news is that none of us want to deal with these feelings on top of having cancer. However, most of us are unaware that we can learn to choose a different response to something that we perceive as negative. In other words, though it is normal to react with emotional distress, you can choose to respond differently, and ultimately lessen the chances of suffering even more because of emotional distress. This will not only give you more energy to cope with what lies ahead, but it will also encourage you to live your life no matter what it throws at you.

Take notice of the idea that you have the choice to respond differently. This is the key in helping you feel empowered in your journey, instead of a victim of your circumstances. It will also help you to see cancer as a *part* of you instead of something that *is* you. But, how can I learn to cope differently when my body and mind naturally react this way? First, you will need to believe that you *can* learn a new way to respond to cancer, and your life in general. This novel way of responding to cancer (and life, in general) comes from a place of kindness, softness, flexibility, courage, and compassion. It is a way that your loved one might have responded to you when you told them you have cancer. You *can* respond to your fears, your pain, your suffering with this same kindness, and compassion. This may seem impossible at this moment in time because of the power of our biological makeup. However, these simple tools will help you to change the way you feel about having cancer and ultimately, help you to see cancer as a catalyst into a journey of change, growth, discovery, and transformation.

1. Surround yourself with people who mirror this way of living. You probably know some people in your life who believe that they have the choice to respond to life instead of falling victim to it. Make it a point to spend time with them and learn how they decided to approach life in this way. Social support is crucial during stressful times, but the type of social support is even more important.
2. Spend some time in nature. Nature helps us to feel connected to our surroundings, and with ourselves. Research shows that our automatic stress response naturally reduces when we spend just 15 minutes a day with nature.
3. Connect with your breath and be completely in the moment. You can do this simple practice throughout your day. Sit quietly for five minutes, clear your mind and focus on your own breathing. Be aware of any physical sensations and thoughts that come up. Notice them, but try not to get attached to them and gently bring yourself back to your breath. Focusing on the air expelling from your nostrils, or the movement of your stomach expanding when you inhale, and contracting when you exhale will help you to remain completely in the moment where only kindness and compassion exist.
4. Practice acceptance; that is, come to peace with the fact that some things are out of your control. Use your breath as your guide and while you practice connecting with it slowly try and let go of what is not in your control. The peace you will experience is something you can turn to for comfort. It is something you can cultivate even when life feels unfair, and out of your control.
5. Seek support. Sometimes emotional distress may be too severe to try and cope with on your own, let alone try and practice the techniques mentioned above. There is no shame in asking for help during these times. Professional help, such as individual counseling and/or support groups can help facilitate this process. Psychologists, for example, can help you to cope with the difficult emotions cancer elicit so that you can restore some feeling of control over your emotional experience, and give way to achieving real calmness and acceptance of yourself and your life.