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***“How to Survive after you’ve Survived”***



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**“Just because the cancer is gone doesn’t mean you go back to normal, that’s where survivorship classes come in.”**

After several long months of treatment, my patient, Mrs. B and her family arrived for her last chemotherapy appointment in a celebratory mood and carrying pink cupcakes and punch. She called it her “graduation party”.

Mrs. B went all out—pink hair to cover her bald head and even a pink T- shirt that read “Cancer Sucks\_\_ Fight for a CURE!”

She had been educated about the drugs that she received, short term and long term side effects and how we would monitor her progress throughout her course of treatment. However, nearing the end of the treatment, she became tearful and quiet; but passed it off as just being relieved it was almost over so she could return back to her life.

Well, that was what she thought. Within a week, Mrs. B became worried and fearful of not being on treatment.

What would happen to her?

Would the cancer come back?

Shouldn’t she still come back every week for a checkup, lab work, or just to see the treatment nurse to be sure all is well?

What happens next, why does she not feel normal, why can’t she complete simple tasks or have the endurance for activity as before? Why does she always feel drained of energy and fragile all the time; was she afraid or depressed? What should she do?

These are very common feelings and reactions that more patients are living with, but are afraid to voice. They are expected to be happy, feel better and be normal. They can't or won't discuss this with family or friends for fear of upsetting them or being criticized for complaining too much and not being satisfied with "surviving".

Survivorship is one of the most emerging topics in the oncology community. Survivorship encompasses the physical and emotional challenges that patients encounter, not just during treatment, but more importantly after treatment is completed.

Sometimes anxiety can set in. The fear can be all consuming and occupy their every thought, and discourage their participation in life.

They feel alone and angry that this happened to them. Could anyone understand and identify with these feelings?

This is where education and the utilization of support systems come into play. A cancer survivor must progress through the grieving and acceptance process when dealing with cancer to be successful at regaining some semblance of their previous functionality.

Local support groups are beneficial, but not utilized by many cancer patients. These groups can provide emotional support from other patients that can relate to one another through all phases of cancer and treatment. Groups can have speakers give presentations on nutrition, recovery, sexuality, and psychosocial issues.

As physicians, we recognize that all may not return to normal right away. The patient has been changed emotionally and physically by surgery, chemotherapy, or radiation.

It takes time and adjustments to return to their desired lifestyle. Survivors can utilize support systems that can facilitate this process. It is important to keep scheduled follow-up appointments, lab work, and tests as recommended by their oncologists; and notify them of any new problems that may occur.

Patients should take the responsibility to keep their primary care physician up to date on his or her progress and post cancer treatment plan of care. We wish the best for all patients and hope for a happy survivorship.

*“Life after Cancer can be harder than expected”*

Here are some resources that can help:

American Cancer Society

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

*After Breast Cancer: Answers to the Questions you're Afraid to Ask* by Musa Thayer

*What Helped Get Me Through: Cancer Survivors Share Wisdom and Hope* published by the American Cancer society

*Picking up the Pieces* by Sherri Magee PH.D and Kathy Scalzo M.S.O.D.

*The Survivorship Program* sponsored by Nancy N. and J. C. Lewis Cancer & Research Pavilion 912 819 5704