The Importance of Mental Health Care When Coping with a Breast Cancer Diagnosis: An Interview with Sharon Rivera

Cancer changes your life as well as the lives of the people around you. While physical changes are expected, cancer and its treatment can also affect the way you feel and how you live. The National Cancer Institute (NCI) provides information on *Coping with Cancer*, which includes information on mental health, self-image and sexuality, and available resources for patients and survivors adjusting to diagnosis and treatment.[1]

Cancer patients, survivors and their loved ones can feel a wide range of emotions in their cancer journey, including denial, anger, fear, loneliness, hope, stress, sadness and gratitude.[1] Prevalence of cancer-related post-traumatic stress symptoms ranges from 20% in patients with early-stage cancer to 80% in those with recurrent cancer.[2] In its review of mental health information for patients and providers, NCI makes four key points:[3]

- The cancer experience is more than one stressful event.
- Cancer survivors and their families need long-term monitoring for post-traumatic stress.
- There are many possible triggers for cancer-related post-traumatic stress (PTS) in patients dealing with cancer.
- Symptoms of cancer-related post-traumatic stress (PTS) are a lot like symptoms of other stress-related disorders.



We asked Sharon Rivera, Founder of Saving Pennies 4 A Cure and RadComp Advisory Board member, about her mental health journey as a breast cancer survivor and what helped her navigate mental health support resources:

Why is it important for patients, caregivers and providers to prioritize mental health?

Mental health support can save lives. Without professional help, things can easily go poorly. Unfortunately, no one teaches you how to deal with a life-threatening disease like cancer, depression, and PTSD. Without intervention from my oncologist, I probably would have stopped the necessary treatment that was needed to save my life.

What was your mental health experience like while going through treatment?

During treatment, most of my experiences were positive. It is tough being diagnosed with cancer. The brain tends to lead you down a lonely dark road that can affect your mental health. I always had a way of hiding my experiences when they weren't positive.

Have you experienced something you did not expect in your mental health journey as a breast cancer survivor?

Yes, I experienced two things while going through treatment that I will never forget. I had an outburst on one of my scheduled appointment in the chemotherapy infusion room that was totally out of character. I would call it PTSD, anxiety and depression. In addition, two of my best friends of 25 years stopped talking to me the minute I revealed that I had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Later on, they told me that they were not able to deal with my cancer diagnosis.

What helped your mental health throughout your journey? What hindered it?

Several things have helped me throughout my cancer journey.

- My spiritual belief.
- Exercise with good loud music.
- Family and a few close friends.
- A support group
- My Oncologist helped me through the journey by making some minor adjustments to my treatment which helped with my anxiety.

Knowing expectations helped keep my calm. I would come into the clinic briefly the day before my chemotherapy to weight in and do lab work. The very next day was chemotherapy and I would sign in and leave. I would then receive a page informing me that my chair was ready and should head back to the infusion room. For me, this process really helped calm the anxiety down tremendously!

The one thing that hindered my mental health treatment was when the staff mental health professional was not empathetic when booking appointments. She once stated, and I quote, “You are freaking yourself out.” This statement made me vow to seek out support from institutions and people who are more understanding and empathetic.

What resources are available for patients to feel better prepared to address mental health concerns during or post-treatment?

Most cancer centers have trained medical staff available to offer mental health support, treatment or referrals. Your radiation oncologist, surgeon, nursing staff, or nurse navigator can point you in the right direction and provide an appropriate referral. You can also book an appointment with a mental health professional. Other readily available resources include your local mental health institution, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), support groups and several virtual medical personnel and counseling services. You can also call your local health insurance company.

The secret is never giving up until you get the help you need. Just reach out!

What inspired you to start Saving Pennies 4 A Cure?

I was inspired to start Saving Pennies 4 A Cure because I was in disbelief and shock at the financial burden brought on by cancer treatment. Even with great insurance, the costs to patients can be exorbitant. I feel the need to give back and make a difference. In addition, Brooke Godspeed, an oncology nurse at the University of Pennsylvania was another source of my inspiration. As a cancer survivor, I understand that when it comes to cancer care, every penny counts!

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I would suggest that mental health should be included as part of cancer care treatment and team. All cancer patients should be informed that mental illness may come as a side effect of cancer and be aware of their treatment options.

Patients should also feel free to seek out help when dealing with this life-threatening disease and know that they’re not alone. The toll of being at risk for reoccurrence can be a heavy burden but if knowledge is offered in various cancer centers it can support the mental health of patients. Mental health support can save lives.

RESOURCES[4]

Get Immediate Help

People often don't get the mental health services they need because they don't know where to start.

Talk to your primary care doctor or another health professional about mental health problems. Ask them to connect you with the right mental health services.

If you do not have a health professional who is able to assist you, use these resources to find help for yourself, your friends, your family, or your students.

Emergency Medical Services—911

If the situation is potentially life-threatening, get immediate emergency assistance by calling 911, available 24 hours a day.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or Live Online Chat

If you or someone you know is suicidal or in emotional distress, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Trained crisis workers are available to talk 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Your confidential and toll-free call goes to the nearest crisis center in the Lifeline national network. These centers provide crisis counseling and mental health referrals.

For more information on Coping with Cancer, visit https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping.

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