

# **Cancer Survivorship is a Distinct Phase of the Cancer Journey**

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June is Cancer Survivorship Month, so let us take a moment to celebrate every survivor and co-survivor's story and learn from their experiences. The term 'survivor' refers to any person diagnosed with cancer from the moment of diagnosis and for the rest of their life.

As of January 2022, there were an estimated 18 million cancer survivors in the US, which is about 5.4% of the population. The number is expected to increase to 26 million by 2040. Many of them are long-term survivors, meaning that they have lived five or more years since their diagnosis. In fact, today we include people living with advanced cancer in the definition, and some have coined the term meta-survivor for people living with metastatic cancer. The fact that many people are living with advanced cancer as a chronic illness reflects the great advances in cancer treatment.

Improved methods of detection, combined with more effective and tolerable treatments, have contributed to the increase in survivors overall. Each person faces a unique set of challenges, but one in four survivors reports a poor physical quality of life and one in 10 reports poor mental health-related quality of life. We need to do better. And, with an aging population, we expect the number of people diagnosed and living with cancer will only increase, and so too will the complexities of delivering care. Cancer survivors may struggle with symptoms from treatment that persist for many years after the end of treatment. The most common such symptoms include fatigue, nerve damage from chemotherapy drugs, emotional distress, and anxiety. In addition, cancer survivors speak of loss of relationships, loss of paid employment and financial hardship. These experiences tell us volumes about the effort, cost, and time they invested in undergoing treatment for cancer.

The good news is that we now recognize cancer survivorship as a distinct phase of the cancer journey, or continuum of care. Professional societies and medical educators understand that we need to provide education and training for healthcare professionals to care for the growing number of cancer survivors. Cancer advocacy groups have worked hard to ensure that cancer survivors have access to high quality medical care. The National Cancer Institute has established standards for survivorship care that provide directions and metrics for cancer centers and community practices to evaluate their own programs. Together, these measures and initiatives will provide structure and guidance for patients and practitioners.

Cancer survivors have unique needs, as they may be at risk for recurrence of their cancer and subsequent cancers, and often need support to promote healthy behaviors (e.g., avoiding smoking and excessive alcohol use, and increasing physical activity). As a result, most survivors require long-term follow-up care to manage their diverse needs. Survivorship care includes prevention, detection of recurrence and new cancers, monitoring and amelioration of symptoms related to cancer and its treatment, and management of chronic conditions. These components of care necessitate coordination, often among multiple healthcare professionals. In some cases, survivors receive long-term follow-up care delivered by their oncologist for several years, and others return to the care of their primary care physician. A key to successful survivorship is to feel confident that one understands the treatment received, the need for additional testing and what to expect. This may require a dedicated visit with a member of the cancer team or survivorship clinician.

In summary, improvements in early detection and treatment of cancer are responsible for a growing number of cancer survivors. While we celebrate their individual stories and achievements and continue to strive to develop improved cancer therapies, let us remember that their continued good health depends on having access to dedicated survivorship care.

Reviewed by: Joni Venticinque, Patient Advocate, TSO Volunteer