

Survivorship: An Overview for Patients and Caregivers

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What is Survivorship?

Surviving skin cancer is a significant milestone, but it marks the beginning of a new journey filled with unique challenges and emotional complexities. The term “survivorship” can be complex and personal, as it holds different meanings for different individuals. Because the definition of survivorship can vary greatly among individuals, different support groups may be more helpful to different people based on their unique needs and experiences. Survivorship encompasses all aspects of life during and after treatment, focusing not only on the physical healing from skin cancer but also on the psychological, emotional, and social adjustments. Survivorship support groups play a crucial role in this phase following treatment for patients by providing a help network for patients as they navigate life after skin cancer.

Survivorship Group Types

Survivorship support groups offer a safe and nurturing environment where individuals can share their experiences, fears, and triumphs with others who have faced similar battles. These groups address several key needs for skin cancer survivors.

Online Support Groups: For those who prefer or require more flexibility, online groups offer a convenient alternative. They provide a platform for survivors to connect from the comfort of their homes, making support accessible regardless of location.

In-Person Groups: These traditional support groups meet regularly in person, providing face-to-face interaction and immediate support. Hospitals, cancer centers, and community organizations often host these groups.

One support option in the New England area is the LIVESTRONG Cancer Survivorship Program at the Bayside YMCA in Barrington, RI. This 12-week physical activity program offers free or low-cost customized exercise regimens designed for cancer survivors, led by certified fitness instructors trained in cancer survivorship and supportive care. You can also find nearby survivor groups by contacting your local hospital and asking for resources.

Peer-Led Groups: Some support groups are led by survivors themselves. These peer-led groups can be particularly effective, as they foster a sense of shared experience and mutual understanding.

Finally, family and friends may also play a crucial role in a survivor's journey. Their support can be invaluable, offering emotional and practical assistance. It's important for caregivers to strike a balance, providing help without overwhelming the survivor. Open communication and setting boundaries can help in managing this delicate balance.

Here are some tangible ways family and friends can support a skin cancer survivor:

1. **Listening:** Sometimes, the most valuable support is simply listening. Allow the survivor to share their fears, frustrations, and feelings without offering solutions unless asked.
2. **Encouragement:** Offering positive reinforcement and encouragement can boost the survivor's morale. Celebrate small victories and milestones in their recovery journey.
3. **Companionship:** Spending time together, whether it's watching a movie, going for a walk, or simply being present, may help in providing comfort to a survivor.

How to Choose a Support Group?

Choosing the right support group is crucial for your recovery journey. Here are some key points to consider. First, think about the type of support you need, whether it be emotional, practical, or informational. Decide if you prefer an in-person group for face-to-face interactions or an online group for convenience and flexibility. Look for groups specifically for skin cancer survivors so the discussions are relevant to your experience.

Second, check if the group is led by a healthcare professional or by peers, and choose the format you're more comfortable with. Consider the size and frequency of the group's meetings to see if they fit your schedule and comfort level. It's also important to feel safe and welcomed in the group, so try attending a session or talking to the facilitator beforehand.

Lastly, ask your dermatologist for recommendations or look for reviews from other survivors. The right support group can help provide invaluable resources to help you navigate your survivorship journey. Ultimately, a well-rounded support system, including healthcare professionals, support groups, and loved ones, can make a significant difference in a survivor's quality of life, helping them thrive in this new chapter of their journey.

1. Lifespan Cancer Institute. Resources for patients and survivors. Lifespan website. <https://www.lifespan.org/centers-services/lifespan-cancer-institute/support-and-rehabilitation/resources-patients-and-survivors#:~:text=The%20LIVESTRONG%20Cancer%20Survivorship%20Program&text=The%20program%20is%20located%20at,245%2D2444%20for%20more%20information.> Accessed May 15, 2024.

2. Kiemen A, Czornik M, Weis J. How effective is peer-to-peer support in cancer patients and survivors? A systematic review. *J Cancer Res Clin Oncol.* 2023 Sep;149(11):9461-9485. doi: 10.1007/s00432-023-04753-8. Epub 2023 Apr 30. PMID: 37120782; PMCID: PMC10374798.