

## Getting Beyond "Why Me?"

If you have recently been diagnosed with breast cancer or any other cancer, you may be experiencing a wide variety of emotions: fear, anger, sadness, guilt, helplessness, and anxiety. You may wonder, "Why me?" Often patients are unsure about what to do next and at times have to sort out contradictory medical information and treatment advice.

In the very near future you will need to acquire some new skills, including how to best communicate with doctors and other medical personal, how to choose your best treatment options, and how to manage your own responses and those of your family and friends. Today there is strong research data that a patient's emotional well-being and having good support from others can be important to physical recovery.

### Your Health Team

Cancer is a serious and complex disease. To fight it you will need a team of health professionals, all bringing their own specific specialties to your recovery, including your primary care physician and an oncologist who specializes in cancer treatment. You also are likely to see a surgeon and perhaps other specialists as well. A mental health professional is an important team player as well. Psychologists and other mental health professionals work directly with patients and their families, as well as with the entire medical team, to help personalize the patient's medical decisions, manage treatment side effects, improve communication, provide support, and enhance emotional recovery and well-being.

### Cancer Treatment Can Be as Difficult as the Disease Itself

Conventional cancer treatments, from surgery to chemotherapy, are themselves traumatic to the patient. However, in many cases they are known to save lives. Some patients may decide to pursue dietary and lifestyle changes as part of their primary treatment regimen. Psychologists have techniques to make adherence to these new behaviors easier and more successful.

Psychological interventions have also proven to be extremely effective in helping patients handle the pain and symptoms of the disease and the side effects of treatment. For example, techniques used by psychologists can significantly reduce anxiety before surgery and decrease the nausea that often precedes and accompanies chemotherapy. Psychological interventions can also help the majority of cancer patients who report debilitating pain. Psychological techniques can be used to create positive imagery, increase the motivation to adhere to new behaviors, and facilitate reentry into the real world once medical treatment has been completed.

The post-treatment period is usually ignored; yet emotional recovery from the trauma of cancer treatment may take longer than physical recovery. Psychological services can help mitigate the long-term effects of cancer treatment.

## Cancer Affects Whole Families

When one member of a family has cancer, the whole family is affected; in fact, psychologists consider these family members to be "secondary patients." Cancer affects the entire family, not only because there are genetic links to cancer and cancer risk, but also because when one member of a family has cancer, the whole family must deal with the illness.

If you or a loved one has been diagnosed with cancer, help for the entire family may be in order. For example, when a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, her spouse or housemate may need to take on new responsibilities at home; relatives and friends may be needed to participate in the day-to-day running of the household; and any children involved will need special attention. Good communication among all the players and protection against caregiver burnout is imperative. A psychologist can help construct a game plan that works for all family members during every phase of the illness.

[Click here to take the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory.](#)

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