

What Does a Cancer Doula Do?

A discussion with Talaya Dendy, a Minneapolis-based cancer doula, board-certified patient advocate and Hodgkin lymphoma thriver

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How common are cancer coaches or cancer doulas, and what do they do?

More cancer coaches are becoming available now, but it's still fairly new. My distinction is that a doula is someone who supports another person through a major life change or significant health-related experience. That's definitely cancer, in my opinion. That's why I've decided to go with "doula." As a cancer doula, I guide my clients on their cancer journey. My services are an effort to bridge the gap between the medical and emotional sides of cancer.

Which areas of the cancer journey do you focus on?

I focus on health, emotional support, treatment options and communication. I typically work with individuals and families, making sure they have the emotional support they need to get to the other side of cancer. It's very personalized.

How do you help improve the quality of life for people with cancer?

I help people understand that they have a say in what they want their life to look like. I do this, for example, by taking the information that their doctor has shared with them, breaking it down in detail so that they understand it and making sure they understand how their treatment options can potentially affect their health and their quality of life. If they're interested in learning about complementary therapies and clinical trials, I help them with that as well. The other piece is communication—with their health care provider, their employer, their family.

How does the cancer doula model that you've created differ from the traditional patient advocate?

Patient navigators or social workers at hospitals are great at what they do. But being outside of a health care facility, I have a lot more flexibility to support people. I have additional resources that the traditional patient advocate may not have, a whole network of people I can reach out to. And I work with patients' caregivers as well. Oftentimes, they are forgotten and don't get the care they need to best support their loved ones.

How did your experience with Hodgkin lymphoma 12 years ago lead to your work?

I can't say enough good things about my oncologist, but there were still so many gaps in my care. I wanted to take what I learned and help other people. There are a lot of people who feel unheard, unseen and pushed to the side at a time when their life is on the line. They need to be seen, heard, supported. They need to have their questions answered. They need someone who can provide that emotional support and help them really take care of the emotional side of cancer because it's not just about the disease itself. There's more to it than that.

What inspires you today to do this work?

I keep hearing the same things over and over. "I didn't know about this." "My doctor didn't tell me about this." "I didn't know what to expect." Patients are still not getting what they need: enough information, enough support and enough resources. And having been in that position myself, I find it really frustrating 12 years later to still hear that. That lets me know that there's room for the work that I do.

To learn more about Talaya Dendy and her cancer doula practice, visit OnTheOtherSide.Life.

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