What Is Psychosocial Oncology, and How Does It Help People With Cancer?

An interview with psychiatric clinical nurse specialist Elizabeth Archer-Nanda, DNP, APRN, who is also the president of the American Psychosocial Oncology Society

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What is psychosocial oncology?

It's a field that provides psychological, behavioral and social support for patients going through cancer. I manage the behavioral oncology program at the Norton Cancer Institute in Louisville, Kentucky. As providers, we help to reduce cancer-related distress that may come in the form of physical distress, emotional distress, family problems, physical problems, spiritual problems and practical problems. Psychosocial oncology providers may include advanced practice nurses, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists or chaplains.

What psychological, behavioral and social issues do you help cancer patients with?

At the onset of a new diagnosis, it's common for patients to experience a broad range of emotions. We help them identify the thoughts and feelings they're having about the cancer and validate that these emotions are normal. Then we help them adjust to everything that going through cancer may mean for them, such as grieving the loss of their previous health status, changes to their work capability or role changes within their family and support system.

What approaches do you use?

We meet patients where they are to help ease some of the psychological burden that they're carrying in their cancer trajectory. Depending on what a patient has been experiencing, we rely on different types of interventions, such as supportive counseling or therapy, cognitive and behavioral therapies, or acceptance and commitment therapy. In addition to these talk therapies, we ensure that we're really understanding the depth and severity of psychological symptoms a patient may be experiencing so we can also connect them, when appropriate, to providers with expertise in prescribing mental health medications.

What about physical concerns?

It's important for patients to first talk with their medical providers within the oncology realm if

there are difficulties with, for instance, pain, eating, fatigue, memory or concentration. But a psychosocial oncology provider may be able to help further explore that concern as well as other interventions to improve quality of life. For instance, if fatigue is an ongoing concern, the patient may rely on a psychosocial oncology provider for guidance around getting adequate sleep or accessing mental health medications to treat depression and anxiety that could be contributing to the fatigue.

What practical problems do you help with?

A patient may reach out to a psychosocial care provider for issues related to insurance or financial concerns or transportation, work- and school-related issues or to get help in making treatment decisions.

What inspires you in your work?

It’s a true honor for people who don’t know me to trust me and for me to be able to help them navigate something that’s really, really hard. We may work on issues that they may feel they can’t even talk about with the closest person in their family. The thing that I’m really inspired by is that I seem to have the ability to help people see that they can trust and that good things can come from that.

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