Cancer and Mental Health: Identifying Issues, Getting Support

When choosing a medical oncology team after being diagnosed, patients should appropriately weigh the impact of mental health on the entire treatment and recovery process.

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For a person receiving a cancer diagnosis, the initial focus and energy is often aimed squarely at the medical side of the equation – choosing the healthcare institution, selecting the physicians and PAs, and deciding on an appropriate treatment plan for the specific case. But what is frequently neglected in assembling the surgical and oncology teams is the significant impact a cancer diagnosis can have on the mental health of those who are a diagnosed.

Cancer diagnoses, particularly in later stages, have caused symptoms of mental health disorders to manifest themselves in people who had not previously experienced mental illness. And for those who had struggled with mental illness, a cancer diagnosis will often serve to revive and exacerbate preexisting issues.

Research shows that as many as 30% to 35% of cancer patients suffer from a psychiatric or neuropsychiatric disorder. But many of these issues are minimized in the traditional cancer care setting as medical professionals tend to identify symptoms of mental health challenges (hopelessness, excessive worrying, sadness) as normal responses to a cancer diagnosis. This has led to symptoms being ignored and patients failing to receive treatment for the mental component of their illness.

A failure to address and treat mental health issues and emotional disorders related to cancer has been shown to have measurable impact that goes beyond one's psychological wellbeing. Research has shown that cancer patients with mental health symptoms have been shown to have both a decreased adherence to a complete treatment regimen and less favorable health outcomes. A 2020 study in Oncologist showed increased mortality rates in cancer patients who developed a mental disorder following the cancer diagnosis, which underscores the importance of early recognition and treatment of mental health issues as part of one's overall cancer therapy strategy.

Getting the Right Help

One does not need to do a research study to conclude that a clear majority of cancer patients are ill-prepared for the emotional impact and psychological drain that their diagnosis and journey will have on their lives. A study in the Journal of Clinical Psychology reported that a major obstacle in

patients getting this essential support was a lack of knowledge about where to access the resources.

A good place to start is with a patient's primary point of treatment and contact, such as her oncologist and the oncology team of PAs and nurses. Social workers are frequently associated with hospitals and oncology practices and are available for consults, particularly during the treatment period.

There are other resources for oncology patients and post-treatment patients to get support, with organizations like Imerman Angels and 4th Angel providing peer-to-peer support. Excellent online support groups that promote sharing and connecting with those who have had similar experiences are available via Cancer Care, Cancer Support Community, and Fans for the Cure.

If a person expresses thoughts of suicide, the number for the National Suicide Prevention Hotline is 800-273-8255.

When choosing a medical oncology team after being diagnosed, patients should appropriately weigh the impact of mental health on the entire treatment and recovery process. This means strongly considering medical professionals who are supportive, upbeat, encouraging, and willing to discuss mental health as a vital part of the healing journey.

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http://beta.docker.cancerhealth.com/blog/cancer-mental-health-identifying-issues-getting-support