



# MENTAL WELLNESS & SUPPORT

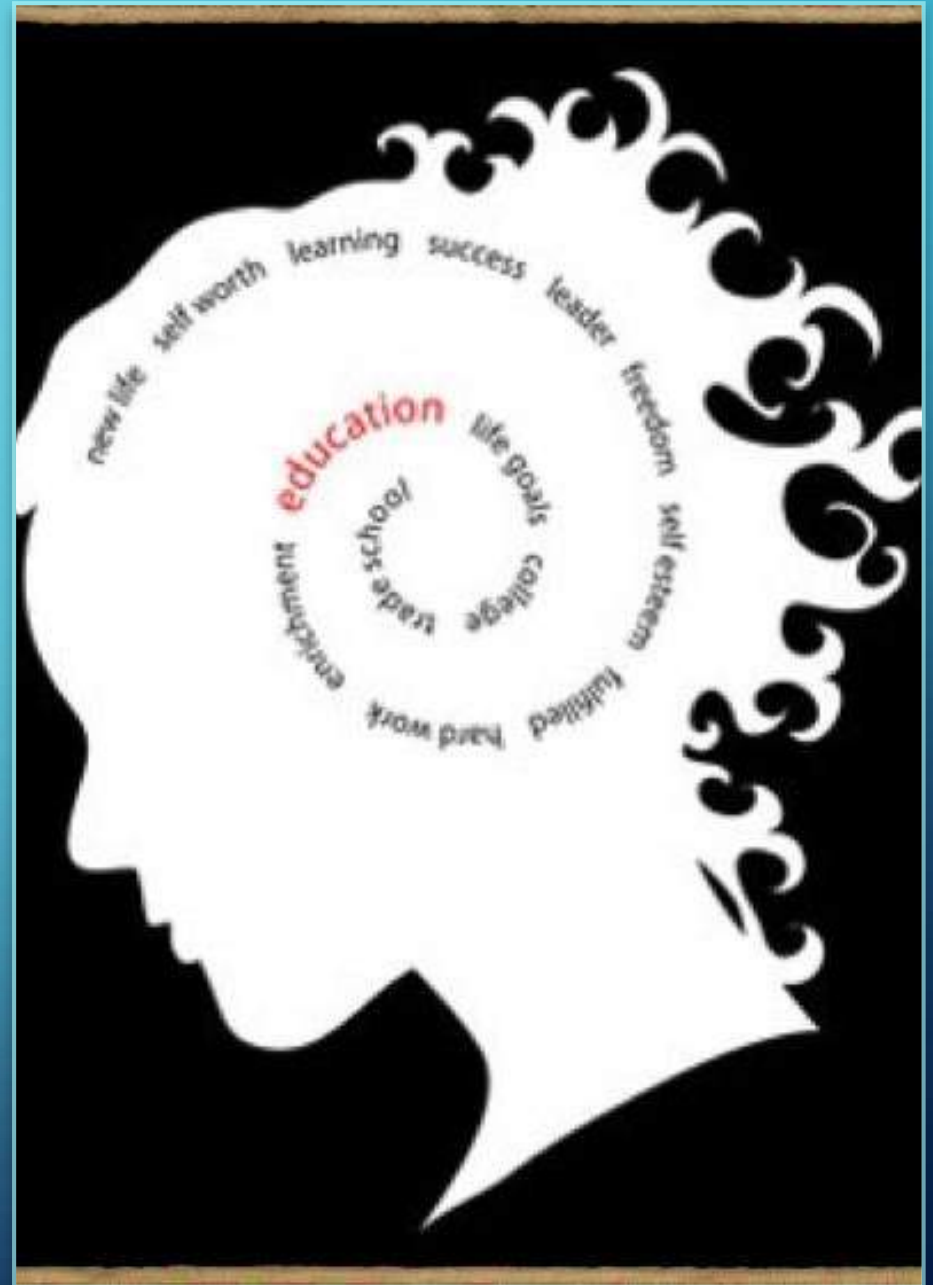
AFTER A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

DANIELLE SCHROEDER, MA, CCC

ALLISON PRINSEN, MC, RCC


CALLANISH SOCIETY

# DEFINING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS





DEFINING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS  
**'MENTAL WELLNESS' IS...**

- A multi-dimensional sense of well-being, involving a balance between emotional, spiritual, physical, mental and social health components.
  - A conscious and deliberate approach
  - Requires personal choice and commitment on the part of the individual & community
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# INITIAL DIAGNOSIS



## INITIAL DIAGNOSIS




# WHEN THE STORM HITS - THE INITIAL TRAUMA

- Finding out you have **cancer is a traumatic experience**. It is also traumatic for your loved ones.
  - You go into a **state of shock** when you are first given your diagnosis and right away your survival mechanisms kick into gear.
  - Most of us have a tendency more towards either **'fight', 'flight', or 'freeze'** when we feel imminent danger/threat.
  - Your **'fight-flight-freeze'** response is unique to you.
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## INITIAL DIAGNOSIS




# IT IS USEFUL TO ASK YOURSELF:

- When I am under threat, do I tend to ‘fight’ to protect myself? Do I often freeze (go numb, shut down)? Do I want to ‘flee’ (run away, keep really busy, distance myself)?
  - It helps to let your loved ones know what you tend to do under threat so they can better understand your behaviour and be able to better support you.
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## INITIAL DIAGNOSIS

# HOW TRAUMA EFFECTS OUR ABILITY TO BE INTIMATE WITH OTHERS

- It is hard to experience intimacy when you are constantly trying to fend off danger (cancer) by either fighting, freezing, or fleeing.
  - Intimacy tends to require safety, openness and vulnerability.
  - It takes a long time to trust you are safe enough to open up again- to yourself, to your partner, family and friends.
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# ACTIVE TREATMENT

BECOMING THE SICK PERSON



## ACTIVE TREATMENT

# BECOMING THE “SICK PERSON” MEANS...

- Loss of identity (such as “Alpha male” or “care taker”) because your whole life becomes your “cancer story”
- Loss of autonomy/independence
- Feeling like a burden
- Feeling ‘needy’ or ‘weak’
- Feeling like “It’s my fault for bringing this burden into my loved ones lives”

**Becoming the “sick person” directly affects how you feel about yourself**

ACTIVE TREATMENT

## HAVING TO BECOME RELIANT ON OTHERS

- For some people asking for help is really hard to do
- **Feels vulnerable** to need someone to help us.
- If you are someone who likes to be in control and fiercely independent, having to rely on others in every way can be a huge change and extremely difficult to do.
- It is not uncommon to want to pull away from your partner when it feels too vulnerable to need them so much.
- Pulling away is one way to protect yourself from the feeling of loss and vulnerability.



“

BEING THE PERSON I AM, I PUT UP A DEFENSE WHERE ALTHOUGH I WAS HONEST WITH MY HUSBAND, I HAD ALSO FALLEN INTO A TRAP OF SILENCE: HOLDING BACK MY FEELINGS BECAUSE OF THE MISTAKEN BELIEF THAT MY TRUE FEELINGS AND EXPERIENCE WOULD BE HARMFUL — AND A SMALL PIECE OF ME WAS SCARED OF THE SLIGHT CHANCE THAT MAYBE HE COULDN'T OR DIDN'T WANT TO HANDLE IT.

”

-AMY AUBIN (YOUNG WOMAN LIVING WITH STAGE 4 OVARIAN CANCER)




*Taken from Young Adult Cancer Canada website: <http://www.youngadulcancer.ca/a-supporters-perspective-onrelationships/>)*





ACTIVE TREATMENT

# THE INSTINCT TO PROTECT THOSE WE LOVE

- We want to shield those we love from sadness, guilt, worry
  - Takes a lot of energy to “stay strong” and “keep it all together”
  - Not uncommon for people to want to protect their loved ones by not sharing openly with each other about how they are really feeling.
  - Can lead to feeling lonely and isolated from each other
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IT IS REALLY HARD AS A SUPPORTER TO WATCH A LOVED ONE GO THROUGH THE EFFECTS OF CHEMO, RADIATION, AND SURGERY. BUT IT IS ALSO DRAINING HAVING TO BE THERE FOR THEM AT ALL TIMES, AND THERE IS REALLY NO WAY TO VENT ANY OF YOUR FRUSTRATION, BECAUSE YOU KNOW THAT WHAT YOU ARE GOING THROUGH IS NOTHING COMPARED TO WHAT YOUR PARTNER IS DEALING WITH.

”

-JOHN AUBIN (A HUSBAND SUPPORTING HIS WIFE WITH CANCER)

Taken from Young Adult Cancer Canada website: <http://www.youngadulcancer.ca/a-supporters-perspective-onrelationships/>



## ACTIVE TREATMENT

# CHALLENGES FOR YOUR LOVED ONES

- Can have a **hard time feeling like they “have a right” to be struggling.**
- Can have a **hard time asking for support themselves.** Often brush off needing support, feeling it’s their partner with cancer that needs it more than them. Can lead to caregiver burnout.
- Can feel a sense of **helplessness and loss of control.**
- May **feel inadequate;** unable to fix their partner and make things better.
- May carry a **fear of hurting their partner’s feelings** if they bring up things that are bothering them, especially if it involves every day tasks or frustration.



# WHEN TREATMENT ENDS

PICKING UP THE PIECES...

WHEN TREATMENT ENDS

## AFTER THE INITIAL SHOCK WEARS OFF

- Very often people try really hard to **create the illusion of “normalcy”**-  
Wanting to **“go back to how it was”** when deep down you know you can't.
- **Can feel so overwhelming**



WHEN TREATMENT ENDS

# AS THE FEELINGS START TO COME...

- Can feel irritable a lot
- Hard time making decisions (even small ones)
- Can really struggle in your relationships and feeling like nobody understands
- Feeling more emotional (i.e. crying a lot, getting easily upset about smaller things)
- Overall feeling like you just can't cope with day to day life.

A big challenge is just trying to **cope with all the feelings and changes happening within yourself.**

WHEN TREATMENT ENDS

## YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY NORMAL IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING FEELINGS OF...

- Grief and Loss (“I miss the life I/we had before cancer”)
- Fear (“I am afraid the cancer will come back”)
- Guilt (“I wasn’t a good enough...”)
- Regret (“I wish I hadn’t said/done...”)
- Anger (“I hate that this happened”)
- Shame (“I am a bad person, it’s my fault this happened”)
- Loneliness & isolation (“Nobody really understands”)



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I THINK MY BIGGEST CHALLENGE WAS  
HAVING TO COPE WITH IT BY MYSELF

”

GLEN (YOUNG ADULT CANCER WITH NON-HODGKINS LYMPHOMA)



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- The background is a dark teal gradient. In the corners, there are decorative white line-art patterns resembling circuit boards or neural networks, with lines connecting to small circles.
- How do I even begin to emotionally process what's happened?
  - How do I go from just surviving to actually living well after cancer?



# GRIEF AND LOSS

## GRIEF AND LOSS

# GRIEF IS...




- A normal process you will go through after a cancer experience
- Connected to your losses.
- Your losses are usually connected to everything cancer has changed about your life.
- These losses have a profound impact on your relationships, especially when you aren't able to recognize and share them openly.

\*\*Depression can be a symptom of buried grief.



## GRIEF AND LOSS




# PERSONAL CHANGES AND LOSSES YOU MIGHT BE EXPERIENCING...

- Identity
  - Sexuality & sense of intimacy,
  - Priorities
  - Roles and responsibilities (such as parenting)
  - Confidence in living (health, that things will work out)
  - How to plan for the future.
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GRIEF AND LOSS

# THE GRIEVING PROCESS

- Requires tremendous energy and patience
  - Common metaphors people have used to describe their grief process:
    - like being on a roller coaster
    - or being lost at sea and having to ride the stormy waves
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# CANCER & IDENTITY

WHAT'S CHANGED AND WHAT'S STAYED THE SAME?

## CANCER AND IDENTITY

# YOUR WHOLE IDENTITY IS TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

- Your identity encompasses your **core beliefs about yourself**
- Many of the core beliefs you carried about yourself before cancer, change significantly after cancer enters your life.
- One man talked about how before cancer he was a “work hard, play hard” guy, and that changed after getting cancer.
- You might be someone who always saw yourself as a “healthy person” before cancer, and now that’s been completely turned upside down.



## CANCER AND IDENTITY

# COMMON IDENTITY CHANGES INVOLVE YOUR...

- Physical identity (physical appearance, body-image)
- Sexual identity
- Social identity

All of these changes will undoubtedly have an impact on your relationships.



CANCER & IDENTITY




## PHYSICAL IDENTITY

- How you see yourself physically has a huge part to play in your sexuality and also in your capacity to be intimate with someone else.
- Takes time and a lot of **grieving what's been lost or has changed** about your body.
- As you become comfortable again in your own skin, your capacity to be comfortable and intimate again with someone else will get easier.



## CANCER & IDENTITY

# HOW CANCER EFFECTS SEXUAL IDENTITY

- Lowers self-confidence and self-worth
  - Don't feel sexual
  - Don't feel desirable
  - Don't feel attractive
  - Afraid to be intimate
  - Physical changes that might reduce pleasure or ability to experience passion
  - “Sex is physical, but it is so mental at the same time...” (Shannon)
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## CANCER & IDENTITY

# PEOPLE DESCRIBE THEIR FEELINGS ABOUT THEIR SEXUALITY AS...

- Feeling embarrassed and ashamed
- Guilty
- Isolated and alone with their feeling
- Nobody wants to talk about it (including their partner)
- Hard as a couples to talk openly about how your sense of intimacy has changed since cancer.
- Hard if you are single to even entertain the possibility of being sexual and intimate with someone new.
- Try to create the “illusion of normalcy”




# LIVING WITH FEAR

“COURAGE DOESN'T MEAN YOU DON'T GET AFRAID. COURAGE MEANS YOU DON'T LET FEAR STOP YOU.” (BETHANY HAMILTON)



LIVING WITH FEAR

# UNDERSTANDING FEAR

- Fear is a lifelong companion
  - It's not about getting rid of fear, but learning how to live with fear, feeling you can cope with fear and still live a happy vibrant life.
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# WHAT IS FEAR

- Fear is a **natural response to the unpredictability and uncertainty in life.**
- Fear is **natural response when we experience a sudden threat to our survival** (perceived or real).
- Fear brings on feelings of loss of control, powerlessness, helplessness, panic, dread, hopelessness, & isolation.

## FEAR IS...

- Fear is often **greatest immediately following a threat (perceived or real)** when the harsh reality strikes and we feel our “normal” predictable life shaken up.




## FEAR IS...

- Fear usually **diminishes** when we feel a sense of control, a sense of direction, hopefulness, and not being alone.
- Fear typically **diminishes somewhat when there is an action plan**-a sense that something is being done about what we are afraid of.



LIVING WITH FEAR

## WHEN DOES FEAR BECOME IMMOBILIZING?

- **Fear becomes Immobilizing** when it becomes such a constant companion throughout our days, and in the months and years following that it **interferes with your ability to enjoy life.**
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## WHEN FEAR IS IMMOBILIZING

- **Feel anxious, worried, and afraid all the time.**
- **Consumed by thoughts of worst case scenarios, the “what ifs..”**
- **Feel powerless to change how you feel.**
- **Feel that family and friends become impatient with your fearful preoccupation. They feel helpless to know how to help.**



LIVING WITH FEAR

# TWO WAYS TO HELP WHEN FEAR COMES ON

1. Distracting from the fear

2. Facing the fear with honesty and curiosity



# 1. DISTRACTING FROM THE FEAR

- **Spend time with someone you trust-** Let them know you are feeling fearful/afraid and ask them to help you take your mind off of it.
- **Do something physical-** Releases tension and shuts your mind off.
- **Do something creative-** Art, music, writing, cooking, or creating beauty, will bring you into the present moment and gives you something more positive to focus on.
- **Turn towards faith or spiritual practice if you have one-** Often brings comfort and gives you a larger perspective to focus on.

## 2. FACING THE FEAR

- Why face our fear?
- Why not just distract ourselves all the time?



## FACING THE FEAR

- When we find ways to face our fears **they have less control over us.**
- We **build trust and stability in ourselves** to handle whatever life brings our way.
- We learn that fear most often **lives in our mind** (connected to the past or future) and **isn't actually happening right now.**

FACING THE FEAR




## WRITE A LIST OF ALL YOUR SPECIFIC FEARS

- Helps you figure out “What am I most afraid of?”
- **Start with: ‘Fear is/of...’**
- Highlight which fears you can do something about. This helps minimize feelings of helplessness and loss of control.
- Writing down your fears **DOES NOT MEAN THEY ARE GOING TO HAPPEN.** Most of what we are afraid of never happens.



FACING THE FEAR

# FIND A MENTOR, COUNSELLOR, OR SUPPORT GROUP

- They can help you explore and learn about what you are most afraid of.
  - When we aren't alone with our fears they feel less scary.
  - Sometimes when we say them out loud to others we realize they aren't as menacing as we thought they were.
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# THE HEALING PROCESS

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS WE NEED FOR OUR HEALING



LIVING WITH FEAR

# WHAT CAN I DO?

“What do I do when I feel I can’t handle what’s going on? Where do I look for my strength and in what do I place my trust?”

(Pema Chodron)



## THE HEALING PROCESS

# HEALING AND CURING

- **A cure** is a medical procedure that reliably helps a person recover from illness

-Michael Lerner

- **Healing** is an inner process through which the human organism seeks its own recovery; physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually

-Michael Lerner

- Healing implies the possibility for us to relate differently to illness, disability, even death, as we learn to see with eyes of wholeness.

- **Healing is coming to terms with things as they are**

-John Kabat-Zinn

THE HEALING PROCESS




# SELF-COMPASSION

- You have to be careful **not to blame yourself**-as you try and come to terms with everything that has happened.
- As you look back it's important to remember that during highly stressful and difficult times in life, **we are always trying to “do the best we can.”**
- You need to **give yourself time and space to really process everything that has happened**



THE HEALING PROCESS

# HELPS TO REMEMBER THAT...




- It takes time to accept all the ways you have been changed by the experience of cancer and be ready to let someone new into that kind of vulnerability.
  - It takes time to get comfortable in yourself with the changes and learning how to live with the uncertainty
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## THE HEALING PROCESS



# SIMPLE TIPS TO HELP YOU MOVE FORWARD

- Take it slowly, and be patient with yourself and your loved ones. You are all processing a lot individually.
  - Keep talking-as openly and honestly as possible- with the people you feel safest with.
  - Try to acknowledge all the difficult feelings you are going through.
  - Try to focus on all the positive ways you have been able to cope.
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## THE HEALING PROCESS

# SIMPLE TIPS TO HELP YOU MOVE FORWARD

- Get support from friends and family, and consider talking to a counsellor or connecting with a support group to help express feelings and help you process what you've been through. The more support you have around you, the more you will be able to heal.
  - For couples, create time for each other to reconnect – focus on what connected you to one another pre-diagnosis. Have cancer-free conversations.
  - Asking yourself: “Do I feel safe in allowing myself to be vulnerable with this person?”
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