

Life after cancer for couples

The chemotherapy or radiation treatment has ended. The partner with cancer is given a green light and informed that the cancer is in remission. Both partners feel free.

As a cancer survivor you do not need to return for a check up for many months, be in a medical setting or see medical staff about cancer. The transition from crises, numerous medical appointments, vigilant focus on physicality can now shift to what was once considered regular daily life.

The initial response is relief. The next reaction becomes wondering how to progress from a familiar crisis state to an unfamiliar state of normalcy. Be-



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cause treatment and healing from cancer has been all consuming, the rest of the world has been "on hold."

Both partners wonder if it is possible to return to their former lives.

Life as a couple will never be what it was before cancer. In facing and escaping mortality, a couple is naturally affected. Over the

months of cancer, most partners have likely questioned or grew in spirituality, changed their diet, experienced extra comfort from family and friends, examined their values, dealt with financial stressors while learning how to exist in the medical system. All of these factors play a role as a couple transitions into

what may feel like a new beginning.

This transition means accepting that life as a couple will not be what it was before cancer while simultaneously creating a new 'normal' world.

The re-entry requires the couple to regain physical and emotional strength. Physically, the partner who had cancer is most likely dealing with changes to his/her body. The radiation, chemotherapy or surgery has assuredly left its mark. The most common physical experience is a daily lack of energy. The journey toward regaining your strength is challenging. For the cancer survivor, engaging in pre-cancerous tasks, shifting from a role as patient to becoming

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healthier and increased functioning, can feel alien and overwhelming. If possible, it is important to re-enter normalcy at your pace, setting realistic expectations and to be patient while regaining stamina. Recognizing limitations and pacing activity is necessary. The cancer survivor has to adjust and accommodate to this new sense of self.

The non-cancer partner is also needing to adjust and be patient with the partner. It is natural to wish your partner was capable of doing all he or she could previously. He or she will also be working toward accepting the changes that have occurred in the relationship.

Often, it is the emotional aspects of the cancer journey that is most challenging for couples. Now that it is "over," one or both, for the first time may feel the impact of the experience. It is common to be faced with a deluge of mixed

emotions. It is important to not fight emotions. Together a couple needs to reflect on the experience, allowing for emotional support and letting go.

As part of the reflective process a couple needs to address:

1. What you learned about your partner.
2. What strengths were noticeable in your partner.
3. The overall impact the cancer experience had on your relationship, drawing on positives.

One lingering emotion that

Couples often ask...
"What if the cancer returns?"
This is a natural concern based on recent experience and the pervasive fear of death. Although it is important to acknowledge the fears, it is also important to prevent them from becoming all consuming. If the thoughts become intrusive, recognize them for what they are and move through them. Do not fight them, nor spend a lot of focus on them. Discuss, share and find a way together to sustain each other's

strength and courage.

As couples recognize the impact of the cancer journey, they build a bridge for the future relationship. For many couples this means the next step is to implement change. Couples need to set goals. For some partners, the changes are so significant that they will not transition back to their former lifestyle. After assessing their life and identifying missed opportunities, they may choose a different, more preferred lifestyle. Most importantly, this is

a time for couples to celebrate and connect with hope.

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