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# WHEN MENTAL HEALTH INFLUENCES CANCER TREATMENT OUTCOMES

Mental health is often a forgotten impact of cancer and cancer treatment. With a lot of focus going towards treating the cancer following a cancer diagnosis, there is less emphasis on the patient's mental health condition. This HealthNews, Chia Hui Erl, Counsellor from the Allied Health team at Parkway Cancer Centre, shares with us about mental health and cancer.

There is growing research that reveals how a cancer diagnosis, along with its treatment regime, can affect mental health and induce psychological distress for a patient. This is especially as they confront uncertainty, helplessness and a loss of control over what they could expect from treatment and the changes it could bring about.

Patients with cancer may experience a range of emotional responses to a cancer diagnosis, which include denial, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, guilt, loneliness, as well as feelings of helplessness and uncertainty that are not uncommon. This might in turn lead to social withdrawal or pose a challenge for some to continue their day-to-day lives, especially once they begin treatment. In addition, the possible side effects of treatment may further intensify these feelings even as the patient struggles to regain some form of control.

### How family and loved ones may get affected

Cancer diagnosis and treatment are marked by small daily losses like general debilitation (the inability to take care of their day-to-day functioning), hair loss, sudden disruption or alteration of life plans, and fear of death. Such losses are associated with a high level of patient psychological stress, which may then show up as anxiety and/or depression. This in turn can adversely impact the people around them.

*Accumulating evidence has supported findings that cancer affects not only patients or survivors, but also caregivers which are very often their immediate family members.*

For example, physiological manifestations of tension could be experienced by family members as they take care of their loved ones. These may include problems with sleeping and eating, as well as impaired health, which directly impact on their mental health as well.

### How mental health helps with treatment outcomes

What I have observed from some of my patients and informed by research studies is that good mental health is a predictor for better treatment outcomes.

Our mental health affects how we think, feel and behave. An indication of good mental health is when we feel positive about ourselves and others, are able to form good relationships, and have the resilience to overcome challenges.

Resilience in particular is an important protective factor against psychological distress and is closely related to mental health. In the context of cancer, resilience refers to an individual's ability to maintain or restore relatively stable psychological and physical functioning when confronted with stressful life events—a characteristic that is modifiable and can help promote successful adaptation to cancer.

Some factors that help improve a patient's resilience and mental health or favourable psychological and treatment

related outcomes include:

- The individual's personality traits (e.g. positive thinking, self-empowerment, hardiness, adaptive coping styles)
- Biological factors (i.e. gene-environment)
- Social factors (e.g. good social support and spirituality)

*Some of the coping strategies that have been proven by research studies to have a good outcome on mental health include engaging in a regular exercise regime (e.g. slow jogging or brisk walking) and relaxation strategies such as meditation, breathing exercises, and restorative yoga.*

In addition, keeping yourself socially active and connecting with loved ones can be helpful in fostering better mental health.

### Mental health support for patients at Parkway Cancer Centre

At PCC, we provide 1-to-1 counselling support to patients, especially to help them with managing anxiety and low moods that may be brought about by a cancer diagnosis. This is a useful platform where patients can also share about other concerns they might have regarding their well-being.

This support does not only involve patients, but their caregivers as well as we believe cancer affects the entire family.

Besides the counselling support we provide to patients and caregivers, we also have informal support groups like 'Coffee & Conversation' which provide group support facilitated by our cancer warriors. Here, patients and caregivers can share their respective journeys and find healing in sharing their stories.

In addition, we have online resource support where patients could access articles on useful coping strategies, to not only facilitate more awareness on the management of side effects from cancer, but also provide pointers to take note of when one goes through a cancer diagnosis. There are also short videos available on topics like managing negative thoughts and coping with cancer that can be very helpful in providing guidance and pointers on how to cope better. ■

### When to call for mental health support

**These are a few signs that we can look out for that would signal to us that we are not coping well with the stress that a cancer diagnosis could bring about.**

- **Physical signs** - sleep disturbances, low energy, aches and pain, tensed muscles, heart palpitations
- **Emotional signs** - low mood, consistent feelings of sadness, worry or helplessness, irritability or agitation, anxiety
- **Behavioural signs** - withdrawal, isolation
- **Cognitive signs** - difficulty focusing, forgetfulness, pessimism or negativity