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How an Oncology Social Worker Can Help

For people diagnosed with cancer, an oncology social worker is an important member of the health care team, helping them navigate the health care system and find support to manage the day-to-day challenges of living with cancer. This includes providing counseling, education, information services, discharge and home care planning services, and referrals to community resources for people with cancer and their families and friends.

Oncology social workers practice in many settings, including cancer centers, hospitals, doctors' offices, cancer-related agencies, hospices, and private practices. If there is not an oncology social worker at the place where you receive treatment, call the nearest cancer center or university/teaching hospital and ask if there is one on their staff.

The education of an oncology social worker

A social worker typically has a master's degree in social work (MSW). Most MSW programs are two years in length and include course work in human growth and development, social policies and programs, methods of practice, and social research. In addition, most programs require at least 900 hours of supervised fieldwork. Oncology social workers receive specialized training in cancer care through continuing education and on-the-job experience.

The roles of an oncology social worker

Social workers provide many services to people with cancer and their families, including the following:

Attending to the needs of the whole person. An oncology social worker understands that cancer affects each person in a different way and that many aspects of a person's life contribute to the experience, including a person's ethnicity, spirituality, personality, life experiences, and family situation. An oncology social worker talks to people about their feelings and the challenges they face managing their health care, helping them develop strategies to address their concerns. Talking with a professional who has assisted other people in similar situations may help people living with cancer identify ways to improve their quality of life, manage fears, and find hope. This process can happen through counseling [1], support groups [2], and referrals to community agencies that have additional support programs.

Offering advice for conversations with family and friends. People with cancer may wonder how parents, children, friends, and coworkers will react to the diagnosis. An oncology social worker can help them prepare for conversations and cope with the reactions they may receive.

Facilitating changes in roles and responsibilities. People may also wonder if they will be able to manage the many responsibilities of lifeâ€"such as working in a demanding job, caring for young children, or assisting an older parentâ€"during cancer treatment. A social worker can arrange a meeting with the people involved to talk about how roles and responsibilities might change and about what support the person with cancer will need while undergoing treatment.

Serving as a bridge to the medical care team. An oncology social worker also acts as a liaison between the person with cancer and the medical team. Equipped with advanced education in cancer treatment and an understanding of how the treatments affect a person with cancer, an oncology social worker helps people with cancer and their families understand the treatment options. For example, an oncology social worker may gather information about a patient's treatment options and arrange a meeting with the patient, family members, and the medical team to talk through the decision. A social worker can also provide people with additional information about cancer and treatment or connect them with community organizations that offer similar services.

Providing access to resources. In addition, an oncology social worker helps people find resources for practical help. For some people, this involves receiving a referral to the financial aid office of the hospital, instructions for applying for disability benefits, or an explanation of rights covered under the Family Medical Leave Act. For others, it means learning about support groups at a local community wellness center. An oncology social worker may also help begin discussions about managing the cost of cancer care [3].

Helping with relationship and intimacy issues. People living with cancer may have questions about how their treatment will affect their relationship with their spouse or partner, including issues related to sexual intimacy. An oncology social worker can answer questions about sexuality and intimacy and help partners talk about how to manage physical and emotional changes they may experience because of cancer treatment. A social worker may encourage the couple to seek additional counseling to work through relationship challenges. Learn more about relationships and cancer [4].

Assisting in the adjustment to life after treatment. Many people find that the months after completing cancer treatment are especially difficult, dealing with the physical recovery and concerns about future health as they try to return to a more normal lifestyle. Oncology social workers continue to work with individuals through the period of survivorship [5]. Many people find this an ideal time to process the experience with a trained

professional, like an oncology social worker. Others join a support group for survivors, finding understanding and help from other people in similar situations. An oncology social worker may coordinate such support groups or provide information about those available in the community. Learn more about what comes next after finishing treatment [6].

More Information

The Oncology Team [7]

Caring for the Whole Patient [8]

Additional Resources

National Association of Social Workers [9]

Association of Oncology Social Work [10]

Association of Pediatric Oncology Social Workers [11]

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Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24865
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25112
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/22
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24398
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24957
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25010
[9] http://www.socialworkers.org/
[10] http://www.aosw.org/
[11] http://www.aposw.org/