How to Make Positive Lifestyle Changes While Living With Cancer

Living with cancer is a life-changing experience on many levels. You may find that your perspective has changed or that you are thinking about your life in new ways. For many people, this experience serves as an opportunity to reevaluate their lifestyle and make positive changes to improve their overall physical, mental, and emotional health. Making thoughtful changes helps people living with cancer reduce their stress levels, gain confidence, discover new interests, and find greater meaning in life. Moreover, setting realistic goals and working to achieve them often helps people feel more in control of their future amidst the uncertainty of a cancer diagnosis.

Types of goals

Setting goals, whether big or small, and working toward achieving them may benefit many different areas of your life.

Health. Many people choose to improve their diet and physical fitness. For some, this means eating more fruits and vegetables, along with other foods that make up a healthy diet [1]. For others, this means increasing or trying different types of physical activity [2]. Ask your doctor to help identify the right exercise plan for you. Health-focused goals can also include quitting smoking [3] , managing stress [4], and establishing better sleeping habits [5].

Relationships. There are many ways to use goal setting to improve your relationships with family, significant others, and friends. Goals can be as simple as setting aside time each day, week, or month to spend time and connect with those you care about. This includes building shared experiences, such as having a picnic, enjoying a romantic dinner, or simply watching a favorite television show, as well as laughing [6] and enjoying each other?s company. Choosing to communicate clearly and honestly and becoming a better listener will also help you build a stronger bond with those closest to you. Learn more about how cancer can affect your relationships [7].

Work. Goals related to work may vary depending on whether you continue working or decide to take time off while undergoing cancer treatment. One work-related goal may be to ask your employer or supervisor for a more flexible work schedule to better accommodate doctors? appointments. Other goals could include better time management on specific tasks, becoming a better manager or team member, or learning more skills through training. Some people even decide to make major changes in their work lives following a cancer diagnosis by going back to school or changing professions. Learn more about going back to work after cancer treatment [8].

Finances. Managing the cost of care [9] is a common goal after a cancer diagnosis. This can involve learning about the medical and non-medical costs of care and identifying questions to ask your health care team. Other financial goals can include setting monthly savings targets, managing debt, and reviewing investment options. If at all possible, it is still important to spend a little money to take care of yourself and indulge in small treats.

Recreation. Goals for fun and leisure activities are important to help you enjoy life and stay balanced. Recreation could include activities that you do alone or with others. You may also choose to start a new hobby or read a book.

Giving back. Volunteer activities, such as serving at a soup kitchen, tutoring children in an after-school program, or helping other people with cancer, can give you an opportunity to make your community better and grow personally. Learn more about ways to make a difference [10].

Spiritual. You can also pursue goals that will nourish your spirit and help you find meaning in life. Some people pursue spirituality through organized religion, while others find value in activities such as yoga, meditation, journaling [11], or time spent in nature.

Being SMART about setting goals

After spending some time brainstorming the types of changes you would like to make, evaluate your goals using the SMART method. SMART is a commonly used framework to help you set realistic and reachable goals. Under the SMART method, goals must be:

Specific. Determine what you will do, why, and how. Having a specific goal makes it clear what is required to achieve it.

Measureable. For example, if you want to become an early riser, then a measurable goal would be to wake up by 6 AM on weekdays. This is information that you could track to see whether you are achieving your goal.

Attainable. A goal is attainable if restrictions?such as schedule, workload, and knowledge?are not likely to be major obstacles. For example, it would not be wise to set a goal to lose 15 pounds in two weeks. Goals should be challenging but not unreachable.

Relevant. Your goal should fit in the bigger picture of your larger life goals and sense of purpose.

Timely. The goal should have a clear timetable that states what you will accomplish by what time.

Tips for achieving goals

Whether you choose to pursue small or large goals, your journey will require determination and perseverance when inevitable failures occur. Here are several tips for staying on course:

- Start small. Focus on what you are doing now to reach your ultimate goals by breaking long-term goals into smaller, more manageable short-term goals.
- Prioritize goals to stay focused and avoid being overwhelmed by too many choices.
- Have a positive attitude and believe that your goals are possible and within reach. You need to believe in your goals (and yourself) to make them happen.
- Pace yourself and recognize that achieving your goals may take time.
- Expect setbacks and prepare for ways to deal with any challenges that may arise while trying to meet your goals.
- Learn from your mistakes.
- Take credit for success when you make progress or achieve a goal. Reward yourself frequently so you can feel good about the effort.
- Consider meeting with a counselor to help you set goals, solve problems, and manage complex emotions. Learn how to find a counselor [12].
- Share your goals and journey with friends or relatives. Ask them to help you stay motivated and focused on your goal.
- Enjoy yourself!

More Information

Survivorship: Next Steps to Take After Treatment [13]

Healthy Living After Cancer [14]

Seven Steps for a Healthier New Year [15]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/24965
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24967
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/28476
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24589
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24686
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