

# Oncologist-approved cancer information from the American Society of Clinical Oncology

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Printed March 10, 2014 from http://www.cancer.net/survivorship/life-after-cancer/recognizing-and-celebrating-milestones

## **Recognizing and Celebrating Milestones**

For most survivors and family members, cancer is a life-changing event. Recognizing milestones can help you put your cancer experience into perspective and recognize the changes in your life, both good and bad. It can also be an opportunity to celebrate your hard work and the fact that you are a cancer survivor.

Marking milestones during and after cancer treatment can be done in a variety of ways. For instance, many people find it meaningful to recognize the one-year and five-year cancer-free milestones. Other milestones and anniversary dates can be marked, as well, such as the end of chemotherapy or radiation therapy, the date of your cancer diagnosis, the anniversary of surgery to treat your cancer, or each follow-up visit.

These dates may trigger a variety of emotions; relief and joy are common feelings, but so are fear and worry about a possible cancer recurrence [1]. Taking time to recognize anniversary dates and prepare yourself for them can help you sort through these emotions and reflect on your experience.

#### Ways to recognize milestones

It is important to find a way to recognize important milestones that feels comfortable to you and reflects your personality, values, and taste. This will depend on many personal factors, including the memories you have of your treatment. If you recently finished treatment, you may still be transitioning into survivorship and may not be ready for a big gathering or a celebration. If your treatment was long and difficult, you may prefer to simply reflect on the memories, but not necessarily celebrate them. On the other hand, a big celebration with family and friends might be just what you want. The following are some examples of ways to recognize milestones that are important to you:

Take time to reflect. Plan a quiet time to think about your cancer experience and reflect on the changes in your life. Some people prefer to reflect privatelyâ€"thinking, praying, or meditatingâ€"while others decide to share thoughts with a family member or \( \frac{\text{Wiethindg} in a journal}{2} \) is another way to reflect on your experiences. You can record your thoughts and feelings as you approach a milestone or read over previous journal entries, thinking about how far you've come.

Plan a special event. You may decide to plan something special, like a hot air balloon ride, that trip overseas you've always wanted to take, a big gathering with your family and friends, or a small dinner at a favorite restaurant. You can do most of the planning yourself, or ask others to help with the organizing.

**Donate or volunteer.** Many cancer survivors find that donating or volunteering helps give positive meaning to their cancer experience. Some survivors choose to donate money to a cancer charity, the center they were treated at, or another organization. Others donate items such as wigs or prosthetic devices to a local hospital or a national organization. In addition, as a cancer survivor, you have valuable first-hand information on coping with cancer that can help others. Consider volunteering your time at a support organization or becoming involved in <u>cancer advocacy</u> [3]. Learn more about <u>ways to make a difference through volunteering</u> [4].

Join an established celebration. Some survivors begin a new personal tradition by participating in established events, such as annual walks or races hosted by patient advocacy groups and cancer organizations. Some hospitals and treatment centers hold reunions and other events for cancer survivors. Communities worldwide celebrate National Cancer Survivors Day [5], which is the first Sunday in June.

**Do something you enjoy.** Celebrating your milestones doesn't have to involve elaborate planning or expensive activities. It can mean just taking time to do something you enjoy, such as walking in the woods, going to the movies with a friend, or getting a massage. Any activity can be a celebration if it brings you pleasure.

### There is no ?right way? to celebrate

Everyone has heard stories of cancer survivors who run marathons or raise thousands of dollars to celebrate milestones. While these survivors certainly deserve to be recognized, it can be easy to feel that your own celebrations do not measure up. It's important to remember that each person's experience with cancer is different, and the feelings and emotions you have about your cancer milestones are unique, as are the ways you choose to celebrate.

It is also important to recognize that family members and friends experienced your cancer in their own way. Because their memories and emotions are different from your own, you may not necessarily feel the same way as they do about celebrating milestones. Talking about your different perspectives and needs before the day arrives may help improve communication and resolve any differences.

And remember that, over time, your own feelings about celebrating your milestones may change and evolve. The celebration that was terrific for the first anniversary may not be as appealing to you four years later. It is important to remember that a person's needs and circumstances often change

over the long term and that it takes time to recover a sense of normalcy after being affected by a serious illness.

#### **More Information**

Finishing Treatment: What Comes Next [6]

Survivorship [7]

Coping [8]

## **Additional Resources**

National Cancer Institute: Life After Cancer Treatment [9]

LIVESTRONG: Finding Meaning [10]

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship [11]

Last Updated: February 25, 2011

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/25241
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24528
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24581
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24581
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/22
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/21

[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/21
[8] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/life-after-treatment
[10] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Finding-Meaning
[11] http://www.canceradvocacy.org/