

Recognizing Milestones [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 06/2014

Key Messages:

- Each person's experience with their cancer diagnosis and treatment is individual and can range from painful to joyful.
- It's important to recognize milestones in ways that feel comfortable to you and reflect your personality, values, and taste, remembering that there is no "right way," or even a single way, to handle milestones.
- Talk in advance with family members and friends about how you want to handle a milestone because their experiences of your cancer and the ways in which they want to recognize that date may differ from yours. This may help prevent unnecessary conflict or stress on the milestone day.

For most survivors, the experience of living with cancer is life changing. When you reach certain milestones or the anniversaries of important dates in your cancer care, you may have mixed emotions, some of which can still be painful or upsetting even years later. It's important to anticipate these anniversaries and choose how you want to reflect on the changes in your life, both the difficult ones and the positive ones. It can be an opportunity to celebrate your hard work and the fact that you are a [cancer survivor](#) [3]. It also may be a time during which you need extra support from your friends, family, or a health professional.

There are various types of milestones that could trigger a mix of emotions, ranging from gratitude and relief to [fear of cancer recurrence](#) [4]. These could be the date of your cancer diagnosis, the end of chemotherapy or radiation therapy, the anniversary of surgery to treat your cancer, each follow-up visit, or monthly or annual anniversaries of having no signs or symptoms of cancer. Taking time to prepare yourself for anniversary dates and to honor them in ways that are meaningful to you may help you sort through these emotions and reflect on your experience.

Ways to recognize and celebrate milestones

It is important recognize important milestones in ways that feel comfortable to you at those times and reflect your personality, values, and taste. Your decision will depend on factors such as the amount of time that has passed since your treatment. If you recently finished treatment, you may still be transitioning into the survivorship phase and may not be ready for a big gathering or a celebration. Similarly, if your treatment was long and difficult, you may prefer to quietly reflect on

the memories. On the other hand, you may find a big celebration with family and friends encouraging. The following are some ways you may choose 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 privately, while others decide to share thoughts with family members or friends. If you choose to reflect privately, you may find comfort through journaling [5]. It allows you to record your thoughts and feelings as you approach a milestone or read previous journal entries, thinking about how far you've come.

Plan a special event. You may decide to plan a special event, such as a hot air balloon ride, that overseas trip 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 organize it.

Donate or volunteer. Many cancer survivors find that sharing resources and time helps give positive meaning to their cancer experience. For example, some survivors choose to donate money to a cancer charity, the cancer center where they were treated, or another organization they value. Others donate items such as wigs or prosthetic devices to a local hospital or a national organization. In addition, some cancer survivors choose to volunteer [6], sharing their time and valuable first-hand experience coping with cancer by serving with a cancer support organization, caring for friends and family members living with cancer, or becoming involved in cancer advocacy [7].

Join an established celebration. Some survivors begin a new personal tradition by participating in events, such as annual walks or races hosted by patient advocacy groups and cancer organizations. In addition, some hospitals and treatment centers hold reunions and other events for cancer survivors, and communities worldwide celebrate National Cancer Survivors Day [8], which is the first Sunday in June.

Do something you enjoy. Celebrating your milestones doesn't have to involve elaborate planning or expensive activities. Any activity—such as walking in the woods, going to see a movie with a friend, or getting a massage—can be a celebration if it brings you pleasure.

There is no "right way" to recognize a milestone

Everyone has heard stories of cancer survivors who run marathons or raise thousands of dollars to celebrate milestones. Although these survivors certainly deserve to be recognized, you may feel that your own celebrations appear insignificant in comparison. However, it's important to remember that each person's experience with cancer, feelings about cancer milestones, and capacity to serve are unique. Any way you choose to recognize landmark dates is valid and valuable.

It is also important to recognize that family members and friends experienced your cancer in their own ways. Because their memories and emotions are different from your own, you may not share the same ideas about how to celebrate milestones. Talking about your different perspectives and needs before the day arrives may help ensure that the day is free of unnecessary conflict or stress.

And remember that, over time, your own feelings about celebrating your milestones may change. 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 your circumstances and needs may change and that it takes time to recover a sense of normalcy after a serious illness.

More Information

[Managing Emotions](#) [9]

Additional Resources

[National Cancer Institute: Life After Cancer Treatment](#) [10]

[LIVESTRONG: Finding Meaning](#) [11]

Links:

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/survivorship/life-after-cancer/recognizing-milestones>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/22>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25241>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31301>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24581>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/23>

[8] <http://www.ncsdf.org/>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25109>

[10] <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/life-after-treatment>

[11] <http://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/preparing-yourself/finding-meaning/>