Self-Image and Cancer

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [1], January / 2013

Key Messages:

- Being diagnosed with and treated for cancer often causes physical and emotional changes that affect how you view yourself; this is called self-image.
- These changes often produce a range of both positive and negative feelings.
- There are many different ways you can to cope with self-image changes.

A diagnosis of cancer is always unwelcome and causes many changes in your life. All changes, however big or small they appear to others, affect how you see yourself and how you relate to others.

Physical changes associated with cancer and cancer treatment

Both cancer and its treatment may change how you look. How you feel about your appearance is called body image, and many people with cancer feel self-conscious about changes to their bodies as a result of cancer. Some of the more common physical changes of cancer include:

- Hair loss [2]
- Weight gain [3] or weight loss [4]
- Scars from surgery
- Rash, typically a result of drug therapies
- Physical changes from surgery, such as loss of an organ or part of an organ (for example, having a breast or part of a breast removed for breast cancer or part of the colon removed for colon cancer) or amputation (loss of a limb).
- The need for a stoma, or surgical opening that allows bodily waste to exit the body into a bag
- Fatigue [5] or loss of energy; severe fatigue can cause you to give up activities that you once enjoyed.

Reconstructive surgery, prosthetic devices, and cosmetic solutions can often help with many of the physical and emotional side effects of cancer treatment. Talking with a friend or another person who has experienced similar changes may be helpful and provide you with suggestions for coping or improving the particular symptom you find problematic. Remember always to share your concerns with a member of your health care team and to ask for more information.

Mental and emotional changes associated with cancer and cancer treatment

In addition to physical changes, cancer disrupts so many aspects of life that you may have identified yourself with before the diagnosis, from relationships to work and hobbies. Depending on the seriousness of the illness and the prognosis (chance of recovery), it may also be a time for coming to terms with changes to plans for the future and the chance of dying. This is often quite frightening and has a profound effect on how you view your life. It is not unusual to experience many different emotions; sometimes it may be difficult to figure out exactly what you are feeling. We know that many people with cancer describe feeling:

- Anger [6]
- A feeling of lack of control
- Sadness
- Fear
- Frustration
- Guilt [7]
- A change in the way you think about yourself and the future (including viewing yourself as someone with cancer)

However, not all changes are negative. Many people with cancer have also reported positive changes in outlook including:

- Appreciation for the strength of their bodies
- Peace
- Gratitude
- Awareness and appreciation that life is short and special
- A shift in priorities

- Clarity about the sources of meaning in life and personal goals

Learn more about post-traumatic growth [8] (a term used for the positive changes that occur after cancer) and cancer.

Coping with self-image changes

It is important to recognize that you may view yourself and your body differently after cancer. These tips may help:

- Allow time to adjust. The process of learning to accept a cancer diagnosis and undergoing treatment may change your life. It takes time to adapt to a new way of feeling about yourself or how you look. Treat yourself with compassion and kindness.
- Talk with others who have been in similar situations. Many times, one-on-one conversations orsupport groups [9] with people who have been in the same situation can provide understanding and hope.
- Build a network of friends and family who can support you and help you feel positive.
- Ask for and accept help. Delegate tasks that take up your energy and aren?t pleasing to you. Asking friends to babysit, hiring a housekeeper, or buying prepared meals helps to free up time to focus on healing.
- Stay calm and, if you are able, embrace humor [10]. Laughter has many positive effects on the mind and body, and humor may help you relax during a tense or uncomfortable time.
- Let your health care team know your worries and concerns. For instance, if you are worried about losing your hair as a result of treatment, you may consider just cutting it very short or even shaving it on your own. Taking some control over the process may help you feel less vulnerable.
- As much as possible, keep up your physical activity [11] routines and remain active. Physical activity creates energy. Social activities can also help you focus on something other than cancer.
- Ask for a referral to a psychologist, counselor, or social worker [12] if you feel a need to receive professional support. A professional can help you cope with and understand confusing feelings and deal with physical changes to your body.

More Information

Online Communities for Support [13]

Finding Comfort Through Journaling [14]

Additional Resources

LIVE**STRONG**: Body Image [15]

Look Good?Feel Better [16]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/25251
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25262
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25263
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25048
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24489
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24491
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24649
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24807
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/24996
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[15] http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Body-Image
[16] http://lookgoodfeelbetter.org/