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Support Groups [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 07/2014

Key Messages:

- A support group may help you receive emotional and educational support throughout your cancer experience.
- Many types of support groups are available; consider your needs and personality to decide which type may be best for you.
- A variety of people, organizations, and other resources can help you find a support group.

Having cancer is often one of the most stressful experiences in a person's life. However, support groups help many people cope with the emotional aspects of cancer by providing a safe place to share their feelings and challenges and learn from others who are facing similar situations.

Reasons to join a support group

Receiving a cancer diagnosis often triggers a strong emotional response. Although some people experience shock, anger, and disbelief, others may feel intense sadness, fear, and a sense of loss. Loneliness and isolation are other common feelings because even the most supportive family members and friends cannot understand exactly how it feels to have cancer.

Support groups offer the chance for people to talk about their experiences with others living with cancer, which can help reduce stress. Group members can share feelings and experiences that may seem too strange or too difficult to share with family and friends. And the group dynamics often create a sense of belonging that helps each person feel more understood and less alone.

In addition to sharing their feelings and experiences, support group members may discuss practical information, such as what to expect during treatment, how to manage pain and other side effects of treatment, and how to communicate with health care providers and family members. Exchanging information and advice may provide a sense of control and reduce feelings of helplessness.

Many studies have shown that support groups help people with cancer feel less depressed and anxious and more hopeful. Although support groups are not the right fit for everyone, and some people may benefit from other sources of support, people who choose to participate in support

groups often find that the experience enables them to manage their emotions better.

Types of support groups

Groups offer support through counseling, providing information and education, or a combination of both. In some cases, group members facilitate discussion; these may be called peer-led or self-help groups. In other groups, a trained counselor, social worker, or psychologist leads, facilitating the conversation among the members. Meanwhile, informational support groups?led by a professional facilitator?provide cancer-related information and education. These groups often invite speakers, such as doctors, who provide expert advice.

Groups may also be designed for specific audiences. Some groups are open to all individuals with cancer, and others are open only to people with one type of cancer, such as breast cancer or prostate cancer. Furthermore, some groups specialize in offering support to people of a certain age group or to those who have a specific stage of cancer. Other support groups target caregivers, such as family members and friends, who may need encouragement and help learning to cope with a loved one?s cancer diagnosis.

In recent years, Internet support groups have become popular, as well. These groups may be a good option for people who live in remote areas, people who don?t have easy access to transportation, or people who don?t feel comfortable sharing their experiences face-to-face. In addition, an Internet support group may allow people with rare types of cancer to communicate with others who have the same type of cancer.

Internet support groups allow people to communicate in a variety of ways:

- Newsgroups and electronic mailing lists send messages written by group members to the entire group.
- Discussion groups, message boards, or bulletin boards allow people to post a message, and others can reply to it.
- Chat rooms group members communicate with each other in real time by typing messages back and forth.

Read more about some online communities for support [3].

How to choose a type of support group

To decide which type of support group may fit you best, consider your needs and personality.

- Do you need emotional support, information and education, or a combination of both?
- Do you prefer sharing your experiences face-to-face with a group, or are you more comfortable sharing in an anonymous environment, such as an Internet support group?

If you are not interested in joining a support group or find that support groups are not helpful for you, consider these other sources of support:

- Talk with a friend.
- Get individual counseling [4] or psychotherapy.
- Ask a doctor or nurse specific questions.

- Participate in activities that you enjoy and that allow you to connect with friends or family.

How to find a support group

- Check with your doctor, nurse, or the hospital or medical center where you are receiving treatment. Many hospitals and cancer treatment centers sponsor support groups for their patients. A social worker [5] or a member of the discharge-planning department at the hospital may also help you find a community support group.
- Search a list of groups classified by specific disease types [6].
- Search a list of organizations that offer support and services for people with any type of cancer [7].
- Use the public library to search for information on support groups and cancer organizations, and consider asking the librarian for help.
- Check the health section of the local newspaper for support group listings.
- Ask other patients for suggestions.

More Information

Finding Support and Information [8]

Additional Resources

Cancer*Care*: Support Groups [9]

National Cancer Institute: Organizations That Offer Support Services [10]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/finding-support-and-information/support-groups
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24634
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[5] http://www.cancer.net/blog/2014-04/spotlight-oncology-social-workers-%E2%80%93-part-i-qa
[6] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/finding-support-and-information/cancer-specific-resources
[7] http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/managing-emotions/finding-support-and-information/general-cancer-groups
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/30666
[9] http://www.cancercare.org/support_groups
[10] http://supportorgs.cancer.gov/home.aspx?js=1