

Changing Priorities

Is living with cancer the biggest challenge you have ever faced? For most people, it is. Dealing with cancer and facing thoughts of death is a life-changing event for most people. Survivors often express the need to understand what having had cancer means to their lives now. In fact, many find that cancer causes them to look at life in new ways. They may reflect on spirituality, the purpose of life, and what they value most.

THE CANCER EXPERIENCE CHANGES SURVIVORS

These changes can be very positive. Many report feeling lucky or blessed to have survived treatment and take new joy in each day. For some, the meaning of their illness becomes clear only after they have been living with cancer for a long time; for others, the meaning changes over time. It's also common to view the cancer experience both negatively and positively at the same time.

Often, people make changes in their lives to reflect what matters most to them now. You might spend more time with your loved ones, place less focus on your job, or enjoy the pleasures of nature. You might also find that going through a crisis like cancer gave you renewed strength that you didn't know was there.

FRIENDS AND COWORKERS

The response of friends, coworkers, or people at school after your cancer treatment may differ. Some may be a huge source of support, while others may be a source of anger or frustration. Some people mean well, but they do not know the right thing to say. Maybe they just don't know how to offer support. Others don't want to deal with your cancer at all. If friends and coworkers seem unsupportive, it could be because they are anxious for you or for themselves. Your cancer experience may threaten them because it reminds them that cancer can happen to anyone. You may decide to try to understand their fears and be patient as you try to regain a good relationship.

As survivors sort out what matters most, they may even decide to let some casual friendships go, to give more time to the meaningful ones. One brain cancer survivor found that after cancer, "You really know how many true friends you've got. And they don't stop calling just because they hear you're in remission. They really love you and think something of you." A kidney cancer survivor found that "letting weak friendships go was hard, but I also got support I didn't expect from people at work and in church."

OTHER CHANGES

Other survivors choose to make other changes such as changing jobs to a

less stressful one because of health priorities or remaining in their current job because of good health insurance benefits. For others, giving back to society or paving the way for future survivors becomes a priority so they join an advocacy organization.

SORTING THINGS OUT

As you consider your changing priorities, use these questions to think about how you want to spend your time.

What makes me feel happy?

What types of things do I enjoy the most?

What types of things do I like the least?

Is there something I want to do that I've never tried?

Whatever you decide, recognize that changing can be stressful. Sharing with others about your new priorities is a personal decision. Some times you may want to share your new priorities are if the change affects another person's life or if someone notices a change in the way you are now doing things. If others find it difficult to accept, consider talking with a trusted friend, counselor, or spiritual advisor.

Works cited

National Cancer Institute, Facing Forward: Life After Cancer Treatment (www.cancer.gov)
National Cancer Institute, Taking Time: Support for People with Cancer and the People who Care for Them (www.cancer.gov)
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(www.fhcrc.org/patient/support/survivorship/resources/)