

# FACING THE Fear OF Cancer Recurrence

A Closer Look at WHAT TRIGGERS IT  
and WHAT YOU CAN DO About It

by Susan Krigel, PhD

**A**lmost all cancer survivors have a few things in common: shock at being diagnosed, significant challenges in dealing with the side effects of treatment, and anxiety or worry when active treatment ends and the oncologist's office says, "We'll see you in three months." Part of that worry is not knowing what lies ahead, wondering if your life will get back to normal and fearing that the cancer will return.

**FEAR OF RECURRENCE – A FEAR THAT CANCER WILL RETURN OR ADVANCE – IS NEARLY UNIVERSAL AMONG CANCER SURVIVORS.**

Nearly all survivors have at least some fear of cancer recurrence, and it is not uncommon for it to last for years. As a



psychologist who specializes in working with cancer survivors, I don't try to talk people out of having a fear of recurrence. After all, most cancer survivors face some level of risk of their

home watching TV or sleeping. The longer this pattern persists, the more depressed she becomes, furthering her downward spiral. Or, for another example, a colorectal cancer survivor

## KNOW WHEN TO Get Help

While a certain degree of cancer recurrence fear is normal, sometimes the fear can become overwhelming and difficult to manage on your own.

Seek professional help if ...

- ◆ You're experiencing a significant level of anxiety about recurrence
- ◆ You have not been able to reduce the level of anxiety on your own
- ◆ Anxiety is significantly impairing your quality of life
- ◆ You are in danger of harming yourself or someone else

Ask your healthcare team for a referral to a mental health professional.

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cancer recurring. My goal in working with survivors is to help them manage their anxiety about cancer recurrence and harness their fear of recurrence to help them stride toward a happier, healthier life.

**ALTHOUGH A LOW TO MODERATE LEVEL OF FEAR OF RECURRENCE IS NORMAL, HIGH LEVELS CAN IMPAIR A PERSON'S OVERALL HEALTH AND QUALITY OF LIFE.**

Studies have shown that survivors with high levels of anxiety about recurrence have higher levels of depression and lower physical, cognitive, and social functioning. For example, a woman with a severe fear of recurrence may withdraw from friends and social activities, choosing instead to stay

home watching TV or sleeping. The longer this pattern persists, the more depressed she becomes, furthering her downward spiral. Or, for another example, a colorectal cancer survivor

**EVEN LOW LEVELS OF FEAR OF RECURRENCE MAY SPIKE WHEN FACED WITH A "TRIGGER."**

Survivors often mention experiencing fear when facing follow-up scans and



*Dr. Susan Krigel*

oncologist visits. Other common triggers are the anniversaries of being diagnosed, having surgery, or beginning or ending active treatment; hearing that a friend, or even a celebrity, was diagnosed with or has died of cancer; and anything reminiscent of



## SHIFT YOUR FOCUS

When you find yourself dwelling on thoughts of your cancer coming back, turn your attention instead to what you can do to improve your overall health.

- ◆ If you smoke, quit.
- ◆ Eat a nutritious, well-balanced diet.
- ◆ Be social.
- ◆ Learn to live with uncertainty. Mindfulness and acceptance can help.

- ◆ Exercise!
  - ◆ Start low, and go slow
  - ◆ Set realistic goals. You don't have to run a marathon to get health benefits from exercising.
  - ◆ If you don't enjoy exercising, find a physical activity that you do enjoy.
- ◆ Get good sleep – and enough of it.
- ◆ Think about what gives your life meaning, and live accordingly.

treatment, like a certain smell. Additional triggers may include noticing a new symptom or a change in health.

### AS STRANGE AS IT MAY SOUND, A LOW LEVEL OF FEAR OF RECURRENCE CAN BE BENEFICIAL.

Being concerned about your health can motivate you to follow your healthcare

provider's recommendations for follow-up screenings or medications. For example, many breast cancer survivors have aches and pains when taking Tamoxifen, but they are more likely to continue to take the medication when they understand how it can help reduce their risk of recurrence. In addition, survivors with a slight fear of recurrence may become more

interested in improving their overall health, leading them to do things like quit smoking, improve their diet, or increase their level of exercise.

### WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO MANAGE THE UNCERTAINTY AND ANXIETY RELATING TO RECURRENCE?

Discuss your concerns with your oncologist. Get an understanding of your individual level of cancer recurrence risk. Ask about how you'll be monitored going forward and what symptoms you should take notice of. Find out whom you should call if you experience those symptoms. Having a plan in place can be helpful in reducing anxiety. And, finally, learn what you can do to reduce your risk of recurrence.

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Patient retained her eyebrows despite full body hair loss elsewhere.



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-Lynn

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