



NAVIGATING THE DATING SCENE WHEN AFFECTED BY CANCER

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Note: This handout is offered as a communication aid for patients and their providers. It is not a substitute for professional examination, diagnosis, or treatment.

INTRODUCTION

Dating can be a challenge. The personal experience of cancer can make the challenge of dating even more daunting. AfterCancer is here for you to help you live your life and enjoy intimacy.

Each person's experience with cancer and cancer treatment is unique; this is also true for beginning dating again.

Bolster Your Confidence and Brush Up Those Social Skills

Start with [small steps](#) to help you build self-confidence and strengthen social skills. Some ways to enter a friendly social environment are activity or hobby clubs, a cancer support group, cancer support organization activities, making plans with friends, or going to a gym. Support groups have people with the shared experience of fighting cancer and can be incredibly valuable for safe social experiences and support through your unique challenges.

Feel Healthier and Better About Yourself

To further boost your confidence, [practice self-care](#) and love yourself as you are:

- practice good skin care
- eat healthy non-processed foods
- exercise daily
- make a habit of good sleep hygiene
- practice mindfulness

Mindfulness is deliberate awareness of the present moment, your immediate environment around you, and the sensation of your body while pushing away distracting thoughts.

These self-care activities will all contribute toward your confidence, self-awareness, and wellness.

Giving to others can be therapeutic and often creates positive feelings. Some suggestions are volunteering for various cancer support organizations to take on organizational tasks, a food bank, an animal shelter, or a thrift store.

Love Your Body

Learn to love your changed body as it is. Often, there is a focus on the physical survival of cancer, and some people feel guilty about mourning their altered appearance. You are validated in your feelings; physical appearance is tied to self-image and quality of life.

Give yourself permission to grieve for your pre-cancer body and make the decision not to dwell on it, but rather focus on taking care of and loving yourself.

Consider taking frequent quiet time to play soothing music and trace over your body with a soft sponge, washcloth, or soft piece of fabric. Appreciate your battle scars and the life they have gained for you. Practice gratitude for the breaths you take as you feel your chest rise and fall and hear each breath.

Make a list of the things you like about your body and your appearance.

A skilled tattoo artist may be able to blend scarring into an appealing tattoo.

Keep your doctor in the loop with how you feel. Discuss with them what bothers you and what you have found helpful. They may be aware of therapies or remedies that may help you, you may enlighten them to, in turn, help others.

How to Talk About Your Cancer Diagnosis with a Romantic Interest

Once you do meet someone who is a potential date, your cancer diagnosis may feel like the proverbial elephant in the room.

MD Anderson Cancer Center Social Worker Jill Bassar recommends [avoiding surprises](#) by sharing your cancer diagnosis early in the relationship. Bassar advises not to get discouraged if the other person decides they are not interested in a relationship; it is better to understand this sooner than later.

Your cancer experience is not an easy subject to broach.

- Consider writing down talking points about how you want to share your cancer diagnosis.
- Maybe [practice with a friend](#) or family member and ask for their feedback.
- Stay true to yourself and your experience.

Find or create a relaxed and casual time with your romantic interest to bring up your experience. Being honest about your physical and emotional challenges may bring you closer together, suggests Bassar. If you have [physical alterations](#), such as an ostomy or scars, talk honestly about how these make you feel and its role in fighting your cancer.

Let the other person know you are willing to answer any questions and listen as they share a challenge they have experienced themselves.

NEXT STEPS

Once you establish emotional closeness with someone, you may find yourself wanting to become physically intimate, explains Bassar. Give yourself a chance to grieve your pre-cancer self, then make a conscious decision not to live in the past. Instead, explore who you can be. Continue practicing self-care.

AfterCancer is here for you to help guide you through your intimacy journey. We have candid and readable information designed to help you.

IF YOU NEED TO TALK

Licensed [oncology social workers](#) are available to speak with **through CancerCare.org** at 800-813-HOPE (4673). They can help anyone affected by cancer, free of charge.

myCancerConnection is a cancer support community sponsored by MD Anderson Cancer Center that offers free, one-on-one support. Support is open to patients, caregivers and survivors regardless of where they receive treatment. Trained survivor and caregiver volunteers are available to share their cancer experience with you. The contact phone number is 1-800-345-6324.

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