



The Journey of Body Image After 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.

This material aims to offer practical, uplifting, and effective strategies to people affected by cancer to perceive one's body image in a positive light. Research shows positive body imagery improves relationships, intimacy, and quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

The cancer journey transforms a person. It affects the body and self-perception. For many, the aftermath of cancer treatment brings a new battle of reclaiming self-love and accepting a changed body.

The journey has forged a different perception of yourself, even without outward scars. Those closest to you may have seen you at your most vulnerable, adding to the erosion of your self-confidence.

There is hope and guidance for those navigating the complex journey of self-acceptance after cancer.

THE CHALLENGE OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Cancer treatment leaves indelible marks on a person. These changes often challenge one's sense of identity and appearance and can affect self-esteem. This churn of self-doubt and emotions can negatively impact other areas of one's life.

STRATEGIES FOR NURTURING SELF-LOVE

You can use non-stressful and non-overwhelming strategies to boost your confidence and help you love your new self.

Frequent self-reminders of your inner strength and resilience

Remind yourself you are strong and resilient.

Acknowledge your feelings

Recognize and validate your feelings of loss, anger, or sadness regarding the changes in your body and how you perceive yourself. It is important to grieve what was to make space for moving forward.

Seek connections with those who share this experience

Cancer support groups are a unique and strong source of support. The people in the groups have the shared experience of being on the cancer journey. Being able to share your feelings and hear what they've done that has worked for them is documented to be helpful. You do not have to expend energy explaining; they already know. The shared experience and sharing of successful strategies are powerful.

You can find Cancer Support groups online that are local to you, virtual, or through [cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org). [CancerCare.org](https://www.cancer.org) also runs virtual support groups that oncology social workers facilitate.

Rediscover your body

Try standing before a mirror and running your hands or a washcloth over your face and body. Concentrate on the sensation and how your body is shaped under your hand or the washcloth. While you're in front of the mirror, tell yourself three things you like about yourself.

Engage in activities to help you feel connected to your body. Taking walks, doing yoga, meditation, and dancing are all ways to focus on what your body can do and the sensations it can feel.

Intentionally nurture your self-love

Be kind to yourself. Consider conversing with yourself as though you were talking to a dear friend going through a similar experience. Tell yourself what you would tell them. Remind yourself frequently about your resilience and strength and the things about yourself you love and enjoy.

Celebrate the small victories

Every step towards self-acceptance and self-love is a victory. Celebrate your courage to face the world. Celebrate when you wear something that makes you feel attractive and dynamic.

Consider counseling

Counseling or therapy with professionals experienced in helping individuals navigate body image issues post-cancer can be beneficial. They offer strategies to rebuild self-esteem and cope with the emotional fallout of physical and self-perception changes. [CancerCare.org](https://www.cancer.org) has oncology social workers who provide counseling. Your local cancer support organizations may offer a limited number of counseling sessions, and your cancer institute social worker may offer counseling on a limited basis, and referrals to more in-depth counseling.

Redefine your personal aesthetics

The changes in your body are a result of your battle. Remind yourself of the beauty of your strength and resilience.

Focus on your health

Shift the focus from how your body looks to how it feels and functions. Prioritize eating good foods, practicing good sleep habits, and activities that nourish your body, mind, and spirit. These will all serve to boost your energy and self-image.

Dress for success

Wear clothes that make you feel confident and comfortable. Experiment with styles or accessories that celebrate you and express your personality.

CONCLUSION

Reclaiming self-love and embracing your body after cancer is a deeply personal journey. It is a journey that requires time, self-compassion, and frequent reminders to yourself of your strength. The journey is easier when traveling with those who have shared experiences. Take a burden off yourself through a cancer support group.

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