



## LIVING YOUR BEST LIFE 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.**

This material aims to share tips and non-overwhelming actions to improve one's general health and sense of well-being while on the cancer journey and provide tangible motivations.

### INTRODUCTION

To some of you reading this material, it may seem incongruous: "living your best life when affected by cancer." To others, finding themselves on the cancer journey is a call to action to live their best life.

On the cancer journey, a heightened awareness of your health and how you feel is natural.

There are many advantages to paying attention to your health and well-being:

- Improved quality of life.
- Improved survival outcomes.
- Coping better on the twisty road of the cancer journey.
- Improved sensing of when you feel different. This is important for:
  - symptom management during and after treatment
  - picking up early on recurrence after treatment
- Increased enjoyment of life.
- Decreased fatigue.
- Stronger sense of self-image, self-love, and inner strength.
- Decreased performance anxiety when engaging in intimacy.
- Improved acceptance of the new 'after-cancer' you.
- Improved libido.
- Improved ability to practice effective self-advocacy through taking responsibility for your well-being decisions: a pillar of self-advocacy.

## ENGAGE IN LIFE

### Activity brings vibrance

[Physical activity](#) has a treasure trove of benefits:

- Decreased stress.
- Increased energy.
- Decreased chance of recurrence.
- An expression of self-love.
- Decreased pain.
- Increased strength.
- Quicker bounced back from treatment and surgery.

### The good hobbies can create while you create

Engaging in hobbies and activities you enjoy is shown to increase your sense of well-being and decrease your anxiety.

Working on a hobby turns your thoughts toward a positive and enjoyable activity, giving yourself a break from the stressful thoughts regarding your cancer and or the challenges of daily living.

The mindful activity gives your psyche a calming environment.

Gaining a new skillset or sharpening your hobby skills can boost your self-confidence and self-image.

Your hobby gives you ready conversation material, helping you to engage with others and prevent isolation.

You may open the doors to a supportive community through your hobby.

Go build those model airplanes and collect those antique brooches!

## SUPPORT GROUPS CAN IMPROVE QUALITY OF LIFE AND SURVIVAL

Joining a support group is one of the best things you can do for yourself as a person affected by cancer.

The shared experience with other members provides many advantages:

- Prevent a sense of isolation on the cancer journey.
- Provide hope.
- Work through the feelings unique to the cancer journey.

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- Learn how others have dealt with practical problems.
- Help with treatment and after-treatment symptom management.

### **How to find a support group**

There are many avenues to find a support group for that special connection:

- CancerCare.org has support groups moderated by oncology social workers, general and specific in nature.
- There are many support forums through the Cancer Survivor Network at the American Cancer Society.
- Conduct online research in groups local to you – these may be run in person or virtually.
- Support groups designed for communities that face specific challenges can be found through online searches.
- Research your cancer-specific organization for available support groups.

### **HANDLE WITH CARE**

According to a study published in 2023 by the Journal of the American Medical Association, for those affected by cancer, their risk of suicide is [26% higher](#) than the general population.

This risk can be reduced through:

- Timely symptom management through prompt reporting of symptoms and speaking up when symptoms are not well-managed.
- Practicing the self-care discussed in this handout to feel better and have more energy.
- Being honest with your healthcare providers when you are feeling down for more than a few weeks.
- Reaching to support organizations and cancer institute social workers to locate resources to alleviate financial strain.
- Accepting help to alleviate stressors and strains.
- Engaging with cancer support groups for the uplifting support of the shared experience.
- Getting referred to counseling through cancer support organizations and your healthcare team.

**Suicide and Crisis Lifeline: 988 – call, text, chat.**

### **LGBTQ+ CONSIDERATIONS**

For members of the LGBTQ+ community who are affected by cancer, finding providers who are LGBTQ+ friendly and LGBTQ+ support groups can make a deeply positive difference.

- [National LGBT Cancer Network](#) provides a wide spectrum of resources, provider information, and access to support groups.

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## LOVE YOURSELF WITH SELF-CARE

### Manage Your Symptoms

Use a journal to track your symptoms. Report your symptoms without delay to your oncology care team.

Palliative care can be a strong option for symptoms challenging you and your oncologist or primary care provider.

Managing your symptoms means you are more in control, feel stronger, and can better engage in daily life and activities you enjoy.

### Treat yourself well with good sleep habits

Good sleep lets our bodies and minds rest, reset, and refresh. Sleep has a healing quality for our bodies and minds.

Good sleep habits help to combat fatigue.

You can establish good sleep habits through:

- Creating and keeping a bedtime routine that tells your body and mind you are getting ready for bed. This can be as simple as brushing your teeth and washing your face.
- Keeping your room dark and quiet.
- Avoiding screen time an hour before bed. Screen time keeps the wheels in your mind turning.
- Planning on at least seven hours of sleep.
- Moving and grooving with exercise during the day improves sleep quality.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and large meals at night.

### Love Yourself

[Daily affirmations](#) can make a considerable difference in how we feel about ourselves.

- Think of three things you really like about yourself. Tell yourself these things every day.

[Be a good friend to yourself](#). When you get down on yourself, think about what you would say to a good friend, expressing what you think.

[Accept and love the new you](#). Cancer and its treatment change you. It's normal to grieve what was. It's healthy to accept and love the new you.

If you find yourself often down about the changes that have occurred, seek counseling help. Your health insurer, primary care provider, cancer institute social worker, and cancer support organization may have easy access to mental health resources.

### Eat Well

Eating a balanced diet while avoiding processed foods boosts your well-being.

## INVEST IN YOURSELF BY QUITTING SMOKING

### *Boost the sweat equity you invested in cancer treatment*

Quitting smoking can be a significant challenge.

Flip that “quitting because you should” conversation around! Consider the benefits of quitting smoking.

You have made an incredible investment in yourself through engaging in treatment. Build the equity of that investment.

- The fear of recurrence is a specter that haunts most people after being treated for cancer. Quitting smoking is a strong way to ward off that specter. Quitting smoking significantly decreases the chances that your cancer will recur.
- If you are receiving anti-cancer treatment, quitting smoking may boost a better treatment response and decrease your symptoms from your anti-cancer treatment.
- Quitting smoking will decrease your risk of developing other types of cancer. It's not only lung cancer for which smoking is a concern, but also pancreatic, esophageal, throat, tonsils, tongue, bladder, kidney, blood, and cervical cancers.

### **How to make quitting smoking easier**

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) suggests [six](#) ways to make it easier for yourself to quit smoking:

- 1) A long-acting nicotine patch combined with short-acting nicotine gum, lozenge, inhaler, or spray can help alleviate symptoms of withdrawal and cravings.
- 2) Use the correct dose to get yourself enough relief. The CDC provides a [dosing tool](#).
- 3) Plan on using medication for a long enough time for it to be effective. This is usually 6 to 12 weeks, per the CDC.
- 4) Get smoking cessation **coaching** -there are many free sources – as detailed in the next section.
- 5) Start some smoking-cessation medication a week or two before you quit, such as lozenges or gum. If you plan on using smoking cessation pills, *varenicline*, and *bupropion*, the CDC suggests you work with your provider to start the medication at least a week before you plan on quitting.
- 6) Take your medication correctly.

**The CDC has several valuable insights, tips, and tricks to help you succeed at [quitting smoking](#).**

Coaching – Increase your chance of success

Coaching by itself or combined with smoking-cessation medication can significantly increase your chance of success.

**There are many free resources for smoking cessation coaching:**

- Through your health insurance company – call member services

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- Through your healthcare system or cancer institute – ask your provider
- Text **QUITNOW to 333888** (message and data rates may apply)
- Free app in the [QUITstart app](#)
- Free phone coach 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669)

**Quit coaches** know what you are going through. Many of them used to be smokers themselves.

Quit coaches can also help you [access smoking cessation medication](#) through community programs or your health insurer. Often, they can obtain a two-week supply of medication to get you started.

**There is a lot of help and support available to help you succeed in ceasing tobacco use**

In summary, the CDC, your health insurer, your health care system, support groups, and your provider can all offer a lot of support to help you quit using tobacco. Combining resources and support in ways that are comfortable and accessible to you boosts your chances of succeeding.

You have invested a lot of sweat equity to get this far. Invest in yourself and your health by quitting smoking and tobacco use.

**LIVE YOUR BEST LIFE**

Love yourself.

Be active.

Reach out for support.

Treat yourself as you would a good friend.

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