

# Mental Health Services for Cancer Survivors

## Why consider a mental health professional?

Survivors who have problems in their lives may seek a mental health professional for therapy or counseling or for help addressing issues that are related to their cancer. They may seek treatment for a specific symptom, like panic attacks, or they may want to learn a new way to manage problems in a relationship or at work.

## What can I expect if I see a mental health professional?

There are several kinds of mental health providers and many kinds of treatments. Your experience will depend on the provider you see and the problem you want help with.

You can expect the provider to listen to your experiences and ask questions about your personal history. You will need to talk about your difficulties and your goals for treatment. Most therapists see patients once a week for about 45 minutes. Some therapy will last only a few sessions, while others may continue for months or longer.

## Getting Started

**Insurance:** Most people use insurance to help pay for therapy because mental health services can be expensive, ranging from \$90 to \$200 a visit. When you contact your insurance provider to learn about mental health services, be sure to find out:

- What services are covered? Is there a co-pay? How many sessions are covered?
- Can you use your insurance with any mental health provider or do you need to see a provider who is part of the insurance network?
- Does the insurance plan have a list of providers in your area? (Some insurers will fax you a list or ask you to choose an approved provider from a website.)

**Talk with your primary care provider** and ask about mental health professionals in your area. Ask if he or she recommends specific professionals that are covered by your insurance.

**After you have the names of two or three mental health providers that interest you,** talk with them on the phone (you will probably need to leave a message and ask the provider to return your call).

- Talk about your concerns and ask about their experience helping people with similar issues.
- Ask about availability, fees, insurance, and expertise.
- If you are satisfied with the answers, make an appointment.

**During your first visit:** Plan to describe the reasons that led you to seek help. The provider may ask you detailed questions about your personal and medical history. Ask the provider what kind of treatment he or she recommends and what other kinds of treatment might be available. Ask about expected benefits, length of treatment, and any side effects you might expect.

**Find someone with whom you have rapport and feel you can trust.** It often takes a few visits to be sure you have a good “fit” with the provider and for them to get to know you. Talk to the provider about your questions or concerns.

**If you don't feel you have a good fit with the provider, talk to them about that, too.** Be honest—it is your treatment and the provider's job is to help you. The provider may be able to change the approach to your therapy or help you find a therapist who is a better match for you. Contact your insurer or primary care provider again if you need further assistance.

## Adult Survivorship Program

a member of the LIVESTRONG Survivorship Center of Excellence Network

## Types of Mental Health Providers

- **Clinical Social Workers** have a master's degree in social work (MSW) and are trained to make diagnoses and provide therapy.
- **Clinical Psychologists** have a doctoral degree in psychology (PhD or PsyD) and are trained to make diagnoses and provide psychological testing and therapy.
- **Psychiatrists** are medical doctors (MD) who have specialized training in mental illness and treatment. Psychiatrists can prescribe medications and may also provide therapy.
- **Psychiatric Nurse Specialists** are nurses with a master's degree in mental health nursing who may prescribe medications as well as provide therapy.
- **Certified Alcohol and Drug Abuse Counselors** are counselors who have a variety of educational backgrounds and specialized training in substance abuse.

## Common Types of Mental Health Treatment

**Medication** can be used to treat emotional disorders and symptoms of distress. Treatment usually involves identifying some target symptoms and trying a medication to improve them. Medication is often combined with psychotherapy.

**Psychotherapy** or **talk therapy** involves talking face-to-face with a therapist to help understand and resolve problems. The most common types include:

- **Behavior therapy** focuses on trying to change patterns of problem behavior. Treatment often includes keeping records of problems or symptoms, learning new behaviors, and learning relaxation and stress management. Behavior therapy may be used with cognitive therapy.
- **Cognitive therapy** focuses on identifying thought patterns that lead to troublesome feelings and behaviors. Treatment often involves recording problematic thoughts and developing new thought patterns.
- **Family therapy** or **couples therapy** involves treating the couple or family to help resolve problems that arise in family relationships. This often involves family members discussing problems together to develop better communication and identify problem interactions.
- **Group therapy** brings together individuals with similar problems to work together for change. Treatment often includes group members discussing their problems and getting feedback and support from each other.
- **Psychodynamic therapy** focuses on understanding how past experiences influence present behaviors and feelings. Treatment involves talking about problems in detail to better understand the motivations and emotions involved and to develop better ways of expressing those feelings.

## Additional Information and Referral Resources

National Association of Social Workers	<a href="http://www.helpstartshere.org">www.helpstartshere.org</a>
MA Social Work Therapy Referral Service	<a href="http://www.therapymatcher.org">www.therapymatcher.org</a> or 800-242-9794
American Psychological Association	<a href="http://www.apa.org">www.apa.org</a> or 800-964-2000
MA Psychological Association	<a href="http://www.masspsych.org">www.masspsych.org</a> or 781-263-0080
National Alliance of Mental Illness	<a href="http://www.nami.org">www.nami.org</a> or 800-950-6264

## Still have questions?

For more information, visit [www.dana-farber.org/survivor](http://www.dana-farber.org/survivor) or contact the Adult Survivorship Program at **617-632-4LAD (Life After Diagnosis)** or [dfci\\_adultsurvivors@dfci.harvard.edu](mailto:dfci_adultsurvivors@dfci.harvard.edu).

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