

Self-image and cancer



Self-image is the perception of how one views oneself. A person's self-image is usually affected by his or her:

- Physical looks
- Natural temperament and qualities
- Personal history – traumas, life experiences, relationships
- Roles and responsibilities
- Spirituality

The cancer diagnosis brings with it a great deal of changes to many aspects of a person's life, particularly in terms of physical looks, relationships, roles, responsibilities and spirituality. These may lead to changes in the person's self-image, whether positive or negative.

Causes of changes to self-image

- **Physical Changes**

Cancer treatments may change the way you look, and this can affect your feelings and thoughts about your own physical body; in short, your body image. You may feel self-conscious about these changes, which can include:

- Hair loss
- Weight gain or loss
- Scars from surgery
- Rashes or skin changes from treatments
- Loss of limbs or body parts
- Having an ostomy (a surgical opening over the abdomen that allows bodily waste to exit the body into a bag)
- Fatigue or loss of energy, which can cause you to give up activities you once enjoyed

Following treatment, some of these changes may dissipate over time and eventually resolve, although some may be long term and will take time to get used to.

- **Emotional Changes**

Our self-confidence is closely linked with our physical appearance, the self-worth we derive from the roles we play in our lives, as well as the affirmation we receive from people who are important to us. Due to the physical changes mentioned above, some of us may feel unattractive to others and to ourselves, or feel a lower sense of worth due to the changes in roles we play. This can result in feelings of sadness, anxiety, fear, anger, shame and loss of control.

- **Relationship Changes**

The ripple effects from physical and emotional changes can impact how survivors relate to the people who are important to them (e.g. family and friends). Some may feel like they are no longer the same person as they were before the cancer diagnosis. There may be worries that their family and friends may be scared to be near them, or may not accept them because of their bodily changes. Conversely, family and friends may not have the courage, or may not know how to reach out to them out of fear of hurting them. Without open communication, this can result in emotional distancing between the person with cancer and his or her loved ones, leading to strained relationships.

- **Changes in Roles and Responsibilities**

Having cancer may also lead to changes in roles and responsibilities. For instance, a main breadwinner may have to stop work temporarily and lose income because of the need to undergo daily treatment; or fatigue from anticancer treatment may keep a homemaker from doing her usual cooking and marketing. In addition, loved ones would usually not want to burden the person with cancer with more stress, and may in turn take away some of his or her usual responsibilities. This may at times lead to low self-esteem, especially if the person with cancer feels that he or she is no longer able to contribute actively to the family.

- **Impacts**

Spirituality can be defined as one's sense of peace, purpose, connection to others and beliefs about the meaning of life. For some, a cancer diagnosis can have a negative impact on their spirituality. They may start to question why this is happening to them at this point in their lives, or doubt their relationships with God and with others. The image they had of themselves might be shaken. Find out more about how to better manage this in the following section.

What you can do

Despite the significance of a cancer diagnosis, many people can and go on to live meaningful and fulfilling lives. These people often choose to have positive mindsets and communicate openly to their loved ones on their challenges and needs. They accept their challenges and are open to receive help from their loved ones and care team. Here are some tips to help you feel better about yourself, and build a healthy self-image:

<p>Taking care of your appearance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pay special attention to your personal hygiene. Take regular showers, comb your hair, and trim your nails• Wear clothes that make you feel good about yourself• Ladies may participate in the "Look Good, Feel Better " program, to learn about cosmetic techniques and alternative hair fashion catered for ladies with cancer	
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Lifestyle changes

- Eat good food as part of a healthy, balanced diet. Make meals a special time, even if you are eating alone. Turn off the TV, set the table, light a candle and make a moment to feel grateful
- Exercise regularly. Go for a brisk walk everyday
- Get enough sleep
- Reduce your stress levels through mindful breathing, meditation or massages
- Make your living space clean, comfortable and attractive. Display items that remind you of your achievements and the special times and people in your life
- Get artistic. Activities like painting, music, and dance enable you to express yourself, interact positively with others and reduce your stress levels
- Set yourself a challenge that you can realistically complete
- Do some of the things that you have been putting off, such as cleaning the kitchen, taking up a new hobby, or learning new skills

<p>Emotional and spiritual care</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be kind to yourself. It is normal to have questions and uncertainties, especially if one experiences a serious illness such as cancer. If possible, take this negative event as an opportunity for more soul searching, deepening of your own beliefs and values, and personal growth • Make a list of your strengths and achievements. Read through them regularly, even daily. Get a loved one to help you with this, if needed • Think positively about yourself. Remind yourself that you are a unique, special and valuable person and that you deserve to feel good about yourself • Do more of the things that you enjoy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge any negative thoughts about yourself such as “I never do anything right” or “No one really likes me”
<p>Building Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be nice to people and do nice things for them. Putting a smile on someone’s face is bound to put one on yours • Involve people who are close to you. Have open conversations with your loved ones to tell them what you are going through and ask for their support and advice • Spend more time with your loved ones. At the same time, enlarge your circle by making an effort to meet and befriend people. Joining a support group may help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid people who treat you badly or make you feel bad about yourself. This could mean being more assertive

When to call your cancer care team

Please inform your doctor or nurse if you feel that any of the abovementioned changes or problems are causing you distress.

If you are a patient with NCCS, you may also call **+65 6306 1777** to book an appointment to speak to an NCCS medical social worker if you need to talk to someone about your emotions.

If you have any questions regarding the above, please call Cancer Helpline at +65 6225 5655 or approach your doctor or nurse for further details.

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