Trauma & Growth:
Making the Most of Hard Times

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Main Points

1. Cancer is tough!

2. Post-traumatic Stress symptoms (PTS) after cancer are common.

3. Post-traumatic Growth (PTG) is normal and healthy and unrelated to physical health and quality of life.

4. PTS and PTG are unrelated. Both can occur in the same person.

5. Benefit-Finding and Meaning Making result in better physical and mental health.
Fear of Recurrence
Living with Uncertainty

- Ranges 5%-89% in cancer survivors

- Persists at least up to 9 years post treatment
What is Post-Traumatic Stress?
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

• Must include a life threatening event to you or someone you are very close to (child, spouse)

• 3 Types of Symptoms (cancer rates):

1. Re-experiencing symptoms 36-72%
2. Hyperarousal symptoms 11-27%
3. Avoidance symptoms 7-80%
4. Feeling numb (VA includes)
Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms

Re-experiencing symptoms:

- Intrusive thoughts and memories
- Nightmares / disturbing dreams repeatedly
- Feeling upset when something reminds you of the cancer or treatment
- Physical reactions when something reminds you (heart pounding, breathing difficulty, sweating)
- ‘Flashbacks’ as if really there, as with combat, are less common
Hyperarousal symptoms:

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Irritable or angry outbursts
- Difficulty concentrating
- “Super-alert,” watchful or on guard
- Jumpy or easily startled
Avoidance symptoms (most common):

- Avoid thinking about, talking about, having feelings about cancer and treatment
- Stay away from reminders (activities, situations or locations)
- Don’t remember parts of diagnosis or treatment
Feeling numb symptoms:

- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling distant or cut off from others
- Feeling emotionally numb or unable to have feelings for those close to you
- Feeling as if your future will be cut short
Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms

Why is PTSS easy to miss?

• Many symptoms look like depression or anxiety
  ✓ Fair amount of overlap in diagnoses
• With avoidance symptoms it is easy to have both the survivor and the clinician not notice
  ✓ Less anxious because don’t think about
  ✓ What’s wrong with this?
    ○ Avoid appointments, avoid healthy behaviors, avoid symptoms
Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms

Is Cancer-related PTSD like other PTSD?

• Yes, it’s similar to disaster and violence reactions both in frequency and in patterns over time

• People more at risk are similar
How Common is Post-Traumatic Stress?
Rates of PTS in Long Term Survivors

• PTSD rates vary widely
  ✓ 0 to 32% (Kangas, Clin Psychol Rev. 2002)
  ✓ Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma: 7.3% PTSD, 37% PTSS median 13 years after treatment (Smith J Clin Oncol, 2011)
  ✓ Post-traumatic stress symptoms are more common

• Prevalence in Cancer
  – 3-10% is most common in well-designed studies
  – Overlap with depression symptoms

• Prevalence in General Adult Population 2.4%
PTS Symptoms Over Time
NHL Survivors (Median=13 years after treatment)

- Half (51%) had no symptoms at any time
- 7% had a PTSD diagnosis
- 37% had symptoms not severe for a diagnosis
  - 18% persisted over 5 years
  - 19% got worse over 5 years
- 12% had symptoms that resolved over time
- AVOIDANCE is the most common type of symptom
- [Self-reported symptoms, not clinical exam]

PTS Risk: Who is more likely to have symptoms?

- Younger (teenagers and young adults)
- Parents of pediatric patients
- Lower finances and education resources
- More aggressive disease and treatment
- Recurrence of disease
- Low social support
- Negative perceptions: Worry, Life interferences, Body image and Appearance concerns
What is PTS about?

- Loss of Control (physical and/or emotional)
- Fear (loss of life)
- Loss of beliefs about life
- Intense Uncertainty
- Pain, emotional suffering
- Anger
Recognizing PTSD

• Can be hard to know without evaluating for it

• Most clinicians don’t think to ask or check
Recognizing PTSD

In your life, have you ever had any experience that was so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that, in the past month, you:

1. Have had disturbing memories, nightmares or images about it or thought about it when you did not want to?

2. Tried hard not to think about it or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?

3. Were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?

4. Felt irritable or having angry outbursts?

5. Felt numb or disconnected from others, your activities, or your surroundings?

Post-traumatic stress possible if "yes" to any three items.
PTSD Clinical Treatment

- Strong evidence that cognitive behavioral therapy approaches are most effective
  - Cognitive processing therapy
  - Relaxation, deep breathing, meditation
  - Exposure to relieve hyperarousal
    - Gradual exposure exercises
    - Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing (EMDR)
  - Medication may be helpful for some
    - Antidepressants (SSRIs), adrenergic-inhibitors
Post-Traumatic Stress / Growth

- Stress and Growth are unrelated
- Silver linings don’t eliminate the clouds
- The same person can have both
Post -Traumatic Growth, Benefit Finding

- Resilience:
  Perceived changes in self
  - Feeling stronger
  - More self assured
  - More experienced
  - More able to face future challenges
Perceived Benefits

- 92 women with breast cancer
- 83% identified benefit
- Benefits in the following categories:
  - 46% Relating to others
  - 13% Health-related benefits
  - 12% Appreciation of life
  - 11% New possibilities
  - 9% Personal strength/growth
  - 6% Spirituality

Role Changes 5 Years after Treatment

Appreciation for life
Life satisfaction

Religious/Spiritual life
Spouse role
Parenting role

Work/student role
Activities
Home care

Sex life

80-90% better, 5% worse
50-60% better, 10% worse
25-35% better, 20% worse
20% better, 45% worse
Benefit Finding

Definition:

- Benefit finding: Cancer and treatment…
  - Has led me to be more accepting of things.
  - Has taught me to adjust to things I can’t change.
  - Has improved my life by .... (for you)

Importance of benefit-finding:

- Predicts lower distress and depressive symptoms 4-7 years later
- Improved immune responses
Solutions:

Find people to talk to who understand
Make Meaning

- Find a purpose for your daily life
- Find spiritual peace
- Find your own lemon transformation
Use Fear, Worry, Trauma to Motivate You to Take Charge (not avoid)
Distress & Worry Solutions

> DO something you control to feel better.

> Take charge, maintain health, make it your life.

  ✓ Talk about options, possibilities
  ✓ Accept feelings, share them
  ✓ Gather information
  ✓ Prepare for the worst (wills, advanced directives, inform family of your wishes)
  ✓ Plan for the best (vacation, plan pleasure each day)
Take Charge Opportunities
Survivorship Program

Phone: (206) 667-2814
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K. Scott Baker, MD, Director
Karen Syrjala, PhD, Co-Director
Elizabeth Kaplan, MD
Leslie Veitmeier, ARNP
Debra Loacker, RN
Emily Rajotte, Program Manager
Emy Hammond, Program Assistant
Joli Bartell, Project Coordinator
Jessica Weeber, Research Assistant
Survivorship Program for Anyone:

- Off treatment (non-hormonal) without active oncologic disease
- All ages
- All diseases
- Any location of oncology treatment
- Any referral source:
  - Oncologist
  - Primary care provider
  - Self
Main Points

1. Post-traumatic Stress (PTS) symptoms after cancer is common.

2. Post-traumatic Growth (PTG) is normal, healthy and unrelated to physical health and quality of life.

3. PTS and PTG are unrelated. Both can occur in the same person.

4. Benefit Finding and Meaning Making result in better physical and mental health.

5. Benefit Finding and Meaning Making can make it easier to move forward in taking charge of your life.