Article Series Mental Health All

Reframing cancer as a marathon, not a sprint

4 min read

Like (0) Likes

Bookmark

Share

Print



All Mental Health

Resize

A A A

While everyone’s cancer journey is unique, some parts of the experience of living with cancer are the same. Here’s one: the journey isn't a straight line. In other words: expect the unexpected.

“A diagnosis of cancer is a journey,” Dr. Akanksha Sharma, a neuro-oncologist at Saint John’s Cancer Institute, tells Thrive. “There are going to be ups and downs and highs and lows, points where you have to pause and just breathe to get through, and other points where you are all consumed. It is not a fast sprint but a marathon that

requires you to conserve energy at some times and expend it at others.”

Each phase of this journey may have its own unique physical challenges and emotional setbacks. Being aware of these can help you deal with them if, and when, they happen.

For example, the end of active treatment may bring relief, but also new concerns. You may worry that your cancer will come back. This may make it harder to enjoy life, sleep well, and take care of yourself. Life after treatment is another phase in the marathon where you may still be moving forward, though maybe not as fast as you’d like.

So how can you get yourself in the marathon mindset?

Reframing — which means trying to see a situation in a new or different way — is a specific technique to consider. Since there are many parts of your cancer journey that may be out of your control, reframing is a way to focus on what you *can* control.

How does reframing work?

First, challenge your perspective.

Ask yourself: what’s another way to view my situation?

For example, here are some ways to reframe negative beliefs you might be holding:

- “I’m disappointed with where I am right now, but I know that’s part of the journey.”
- “I’m not where I want to be, but positive results take time and consistency.”
- “It’s never too late to build new healthy habits that support my health.”

Second, choose a positive lens.

Ask yourself: what can be seen as an opportunity rather than a failure? For example:

- “What I thought was a setback is actually another step toward a milestone.”
- “What I’m going through today isn’t my whole story. It’s one small part of my much larger story.”

- “Every stage of my journey teaches me something new about myself.”

Here are some **Microsteps** to consider taking to reframe your journey as a marathon, not a sprint. As always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Setting aside 5 minutes each morning to challenge a negative thought you’ve had about your cancer journey.

Write it down, then challenge it by listing three more positive perspectives. You’ll build the mental muscle of reframing. You can use the two-part framework above if it helps.

When you find yourself using the word “can’t,” add the word “yet.”

When something feels hard, try reframing “I can’t do this” into “I can’t do this yet”. It can be a powerful way to remind yourself that cancer is a marathon and not a sprint. This mindset shift can help you remember that struggles on your cancer journey can be steps toward growth.

Starting a cancer journey journal to track progress, reflect on challenges and strengths, and celebrate small victories.

Your journal can be a powerful tool for reflection, planning, and motivation. It might include thoughts about your mental health, goals, photos, inspirational quotes, and even notes to your future self. Over time, you can look back at it and see how your unique journey has unfolded.

When you feel you’ve hit a setback, reminding yourself of a past obstacle you overcame.

Reflecting on past victories on your cancer journey can remind you that you’ve done hard things before — and can do them again.

Scheduling one day a month to “take the day off” from cancer.

A cancer journey can be long and tiring, and sometimes you may just need a break from it all – no appointments, no discussions, no research. Spend the day doing things that bring you joy and relaxation. This could involve spending time outdoors, relaxing with a book, or enjoying a hobby – anything that gives your mind and body a well-deserved break.

Celebrating a milestone that focuses on your progress instead of the finish line.

Consider breaking your journey into many small milestones, instead of only looking ahead to post-treatment. For example, you might feel proud of completing a treatment cycle or recovering from a side effect like nausea or fatigue. Or you might pat yourself on the back showing up for a doctor’s appointment or scan.

Developed with Thrive Global