Article Series Mental Health

Should You Join a Support Group?

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Joining a support group for people living with cancer can help you cope emotionally, connect with others who understand your experience, and gain valuable advice and support.

There are many types of support groups out there, including groups for specific types of cancers or stages of treatment, or certain genders and ages. Support groups may be accessed online or in-person.

Support group meetings offer the opportunity for people to discuss their feelings, the side effects of treatment, their relationships with others, or other concerns in their daily lives. Research from a study of patients with breast cancer suggests that joining a cancer support group may improve quality of life.

To find a support group, reach out to your care team or hospital social worker to find out if your hospital or cancer center offers them. You can also try searching the websites of organizations for your specific cancer type.

If you are interested in joining a support group, reach out to the contact person or group leader. They can tell you whether it meets in person or online, and share other insights about the group dynamics, such as whether it’s okay to mostly listen if you don’t feel ready to talk.

Here are some Microsteps to consider as you explore support groups:

Talking to your care team.

Ask your doctor, oncology nurse or a hospital social worker for recommendations and advice on finding a reputable group that meets your needs.

Deciding what you hope to get out of a support group.

Are you looking for a group made up of people with your specific cancer, or would you rather be with people your same age and gender? Would you prefer an online or in-person group?

Writing down questions you have for a support group leader.

You may want to know how many people usually attend, what kinds of topics are usually discussed, and if the leader is a medical professional or cancer survivor.

Putting one support group session on your calendar.

Once you find a group you’re interested in, put their next session on your calendar. Consider trying one session to see if you like it before committing. If possible, ask to attend a session as a listener first, to get a sense of the group dynamic before fully participating.

Practice sharing your cancer journey with a friend.

Reflect on what you might feel comfortable sharing with others and what boundaries you’d like to maintain.

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