Article Series Mental Health

6 Steps to Boost Mental Resilience When You are Living With Cancer

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We can’t flip a switch to instantly improve our mental health, but we can implement small habits and rituals to help our well-being. For those living with cancer, prioritizing mental well-being is especially important, as the emotional and physical demands of the journey can take a toll.

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from challenges, stress or tough times. Research on resilience –building interventions for cancer patients shows that

therapy programs can significantly improve emotional well-being, especially when started early in the physical treatment process. Studies found that people who engaged in resilience-enhancing programs—such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness-based therapy, positive psychology exercises, and supportive group therapy—experienced reduced stress, improved coping skills, and positive personal development following a traumatic experience, compared to those who didn’t take part.

For those seeking resilience support, several practical options exist. Mindfulness programs help patients stay present and manage anxiety, while CBT-based therapies focus on reshaping negative thoughts. Gratitude journaling may ease distress and improve quality of life. Supportive-expressive group therapy offers a space to share experiences and find emotional support among people that have gone through something similar. Many hospitals, cancer centers, and online platforms provide these services, sometimes free of charge.

Seeking this type of support is important after diagnosis or during active treatment, as research suggests interventions are most effective when started early. However, people at any stage of their cancer journey—whether in remission, facing long-term treatment, or adjusting to survivorship—can still benefit from resilience training. Seeking help early can empower people to better navigate the emotional and psychological challenges of cancer while improving overall quality of life.

Here are seven Microsteps you can take to help build resilience or manage stress if you’re living with cancer:

Repeating an affirmation in the morning that shows compassion for yourself.
Positive affirmations may improve your mood, lower stress, and reduce negative thinking. If you're undergoing treatment, affirmations like "I am strong," "I am worthy of care," or "I am more than my diagnosis" can help cultivate resilience.

Asking your care team at your next appointment to recommend three support therapy programs for cancer patients.
Mindfulness programs, cognitive behavioral therapy and group therapy have potential benefits for people living with cancer. Exploring more than one therapy program can help you find the one that works best for you.

Scheduling time to go outside.
Just a few minutes of outdoor time during the day can make a difference. Simply being outdoors and surrounded by nature can lower stress and improve well-being in people living with cancer.

Keep a gratitude journal on your nightstand to write down three things you're grateful for before bed.
Gratitude practices have been shown to lower stress levels. A study of people with advanced cancer found that 7 days of mindful gratitude journaling lowered distress and improved quality of life.

Taking one minute each day to reflect on something you've handled well recently.
Reflection on past coping successes reinforces a sense of competence and confidence in your abilities, which are both key components of resilience.

Writing down one thing you're hopeful about for the future.
Hope and optimism are important components of resilience and may be associated with better psychological adjustment in people facing serious illness.

When you feel overwhelmed, saying to yourself: "This is hard, and I'm still doing my best."
This blends mindfulness and self-compassion—both of which are linked to emotional resilience and recovery.

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