Article Series Cancer in AYA

Navigating Your Social Life When You’re a Young Adult with Cancer

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Cancer is never easy — especially when you’re a young adult building your independence and identity. Young adulthood is a time when friendships and social life matter a lot, and when living with cancer, these connections may seem difficult to maintain at a time when you may need them most.

But while the experience can be disruptive, it can also bring clarity to your relationships and deepen your sense of self and community.

Here are some common scenarios young adults with cancer may experience:

- **Changing friendships and relationships:** Your friends may not know how to react to your diagnosis, or what to say or do. You may also worry about what to tell other people about your illness, how they will react to the news and whether they might treat you differently. What you decide to tell your friends is up to you. You might want to think about how much you want to share and with whom. If you feel timid about raising the subject, your friends might surprise you – they may be waiting for you to reach out and tell them what you need.
- **Missed experiences:** Cancer treatment can take up a lot of your time and may make you feel physically and emotionally exhausted, getting in the way of social activities, college classes, dating, or work.
- **Changing physical appearance:** You also may be dealing with changes to your body, such as hair or weight loss, or surgical scars. You also may be nervous about possible physical changes to your body. Consider seeking support from your care team. They can listen, answer your questions about physical changes, and provide guidance.
- **Deeper connections:** You may find that some of your friendships grow stronger, and even friends you haven't seen in a while may reach out to offer support. Sometimes hearing about an illness can bring out the best in people. The experience of cancer may give you surprising new insights into your friendships and who some of your real friends are.
- **New experiences in intimacy and dating.** If you already are in a relationship, your partner can be a source of support and help take your mind off things – but you also may want to keep in mind that cancer potentially can change things, just as it might with other friendships. If you are single, dating may pose its own unique scenarios to cope with. You may be feeling too tired or self-conscious to continue dating, which is normal.

Here are some Microsteps that may help you stay connected socially with friends while living with cancer. As always, consult with your care team for recommendations that are right for you.

Asking your friends to keep inviting you to social events, even if you can’t go.

Getting an invitation may make you feel included. Also, having an invite to respond to may give you the opportunity to let your friends know how you’re feeling. For example, if you are receiving treatments that weaken your immune system, going to

events where there are lots of people may be risky.

Having friends visit you at home or in the hospital.
These can help when your energy may be too low for you to go out, but you still would like some company.

Bringing a friend with you to a medical appointment.
Having a loved one with you can provide practical and emotional support. Your friend can listen, take notes for you, ask questions and help you process any information about the appointment once it's over. This is a way to connect with your friends and spend time with them even when you don't feel up to social events

Connecting virtually via texts, social media, video chats or by phone calls.
This option may help you stay in touch if you're too tired for in-person visits or if your care team has recommended avoiding large gatherings.

Asking someone you trust to be your "gatekeeper."
This person can speak for you when you may not yet be feeling up to talking to or seeing other people. They can explain to other friends why you may not be ready to spend time with them and keep them up to date on what's happening with you.

Connecting with other young adults with cancer.
Your care team may be able to suggest support groups where you can make new friends and share your experiences with other young adults who have cancer. Some hospitals have special rooms for young adult cancer patients where you can hang out and be with each other. You also might consider asking a care team member to see if they are able to introduce you to other cancer patients your age.

Acknowledge what you're feeling — without judgment.
It's natural to feel grief, loneliness, or frustration about missed social milestones. Name your emotions as they arise and give yourself permission to feel them. Journaling may help to process these emotions.

If you're dating, prepare some questions to learn more about the other person.
Instead of stressing about how you'll come across, shift your focus outward. Going into a date with genuine curiosity about the other person may help ease pressure and foster real connection.

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