Tips for Getting Back to Your Life After Beating Cancer

by ALISON RICHARDS

Tips for Cancer Survivors

When you're diagnosed with cancer, all you want to do is survive, to live the life that you'd previously taken for granted. If you're lucky enough to be treated successfully, then you begin a new phase, one that you can never prepare for and one for which there are no manuals.

Being a cancer survivor is a unique experience and everyone's feelings are different. There are highs and lows, but here are some tips for cancer survivors for doing more than just survive; you can truly THRIVE in your second chance at life!

Finishing Cancer Treatment

Finishing cancer treatment is a huge thing, but you often don't have the celebratory moment that you expect you will. It's great to mark the final chemo, or radiotherapy treatment, but since the side effects stay with you for weeks or months, it sometimes doesn't feel like closure at all. This is where a positive attitude is so important; managing side effects successfully means following medical advice and trying to minimize them as much as possible. Getting your life back on track could mean going back to work or taking a much-needed holiday. Doing the things you had to put on hold is a great way of celebrating normality, something which I craved during my treatment. Booking concert tickets, making hair appointments when you can finally ditch the wigs or hats, and eating well with a renewed sense of taste are simple but extremely pleasurable activities.

In Remission?

What often surprises cancer patients who have successfully finished their treatment phase is their doctor doesn't say they are "in remission". They also may be surprised that they won't be frequently scanned to check that the disease hasn't returned. The reason for this is that, firstly, the phrase "no evidence of disease" (known as NED) is more commonly used than "remission". If you've had a combination of surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy and other treatments, then there is usually an assumption that it you are cured. Despite asking my oncologist what kind of scans I will be receiving from now on, she said that they can actually cause more harm than good and that a yearly mammogram is the best way to monitor me. I should perform all the usual self-examinations regularly, which is the best way to find any recurrence.

I think it's important to know how your post-treatment phase will be described, as some cancer patients may be disappointed not be given an official remission status.

Getting Back to Your Life

Getting back to reality after cancer treatment can feel a little odd. You have been in a "cancer bubble" for many months and are suddenly thrust back into normal life. Although it's nice not to have to visit doctors and hospitals on a daily or weekly basis, you can feel slightly lost without that link to medical support. You don't get the

attention from friends and family that you previously had too, and although it’s so nice that they don’t need to worry about you anymore, it can also feel slightly lonely.

My tips for this phase are to accept all the support you’re offered from your medical team. There are often “moving on from cancer” courses which you can take advantage of. They offer mental health support as well as practical advice for dealing with the aftermath of cancer, such as ongoing side effects. I am due to start such a course soon, and it will be nice to discuss my feelings with fellow survivors as well as the nurses who run the sessions.

Think about all the things you were looking forward to, when you were at your lowest during treatment, and put some of those plans into action. Meet up with friends and family, organize date nights with your partner, and restart an exercise routine to help your physical and mental recovery.

Staying Positive After Cancer

When you’ve finished cancer treatment and are getting back to normal, a positive attitude goes a long way. Some people are scared that the cancer will return, but there’s lots you can do to help avert this. Adopting a healthy lifestyle prevents many cancers and means that you’re taking positive steps in your own recovery. Being aware of your body is vital, so it’s really important to examine yourself regularly. If you do that, and report any changes to your doctor, then you’re doing everything you can, so you shouldn’t worry about recurrence.

Stress is bad for so many areas of your life, so having a relaxed, positive attitude will help you physically and mentally. When I’m down or feeling anxious, there are two things I do which I know will make me feel better. The first is exercise; on days when I have an early morning run, I’m 80% less anxious and stressed compared with the days I don’t. The second is calling a girlfriend for a chat; I have some really close friends that I can discuss my feelings with and have a rant about what’s getting me down. After an hour I feel like a new person and equipped to deal with the rest of the day!

Staying Motivated

Here's one of the most important tips for cancer survivors: as time goes on, the longer you survive without recurrence, cancer can become a distant memory. It’s almost two years since my diagnosis and it often feels like a dream. I have to read my blogs to remind myself how I felt at my lowest. I think this is a good thing and means that I’ve moved on in my life. I know that for many cancer survivors, the threat of recurrence is a constant black cloud that they live under. For many, their treatment journey is as clear as if it happened yesterday, with many stressful associations. There’s no magic wand to alleviate these feelings, but seeking support from your cancer nurse, or another counselor, will help. Getting a sense of motivation is key, and having survived such a big life event, you should try and feel a renewed lease of life.

Tips for Cancer Survivors: The Bottom Line

Surviving cancer is huge, and you should celebrate that you’re still alive, and actively thrive. Life is for living and loving, and is not a rehearsal, so grab it with both arms and embrace it! Hopefully, you can incorporate one or more of these tips for cancer survivors in your recovery journey!