

# The Mind Matters: Navigating Life After Cancer

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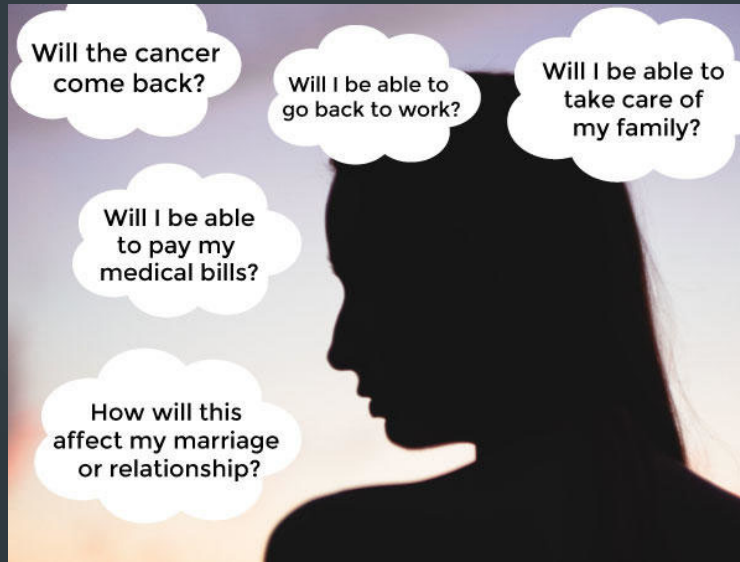
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## Agenda

- Discuss common emotional health aspects of being a cancer survivor
- Understand the role of self-care activities on physical and emotional health
- Provide you helpful resources for enhancing your mental well-being

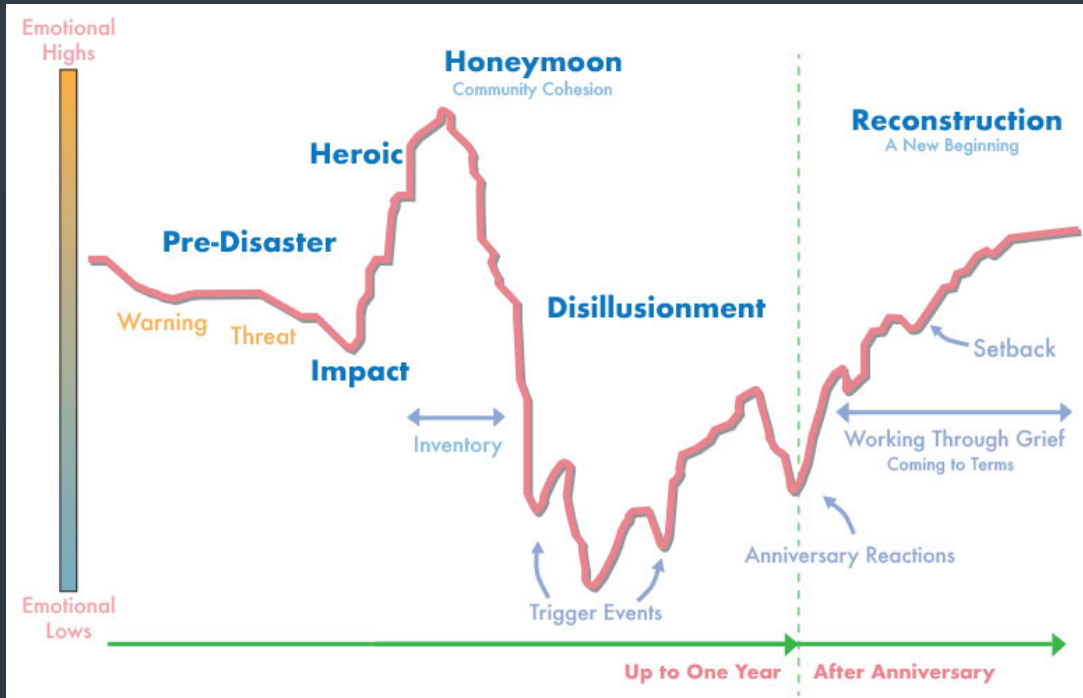


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<https://www.cancer.gov/news-events/cancer-currents-blog/2020/cancer-survivors-managing-anxiety-distress>

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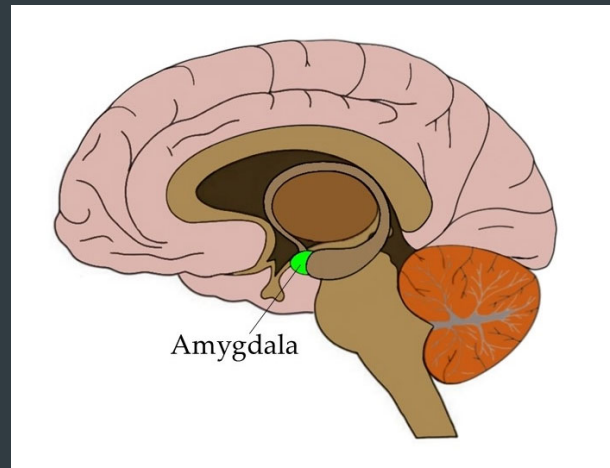
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## Let's talk about the amygdala



### The “Amygdala Hijack”

The sudden, intense, unconscious emotional response which “takes over” higher brain centers



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## Physiology of stress



The amygdala “pulls the fire alarm”

This activates the *fight or flight mechanism, aka the sympathetic nervous system*

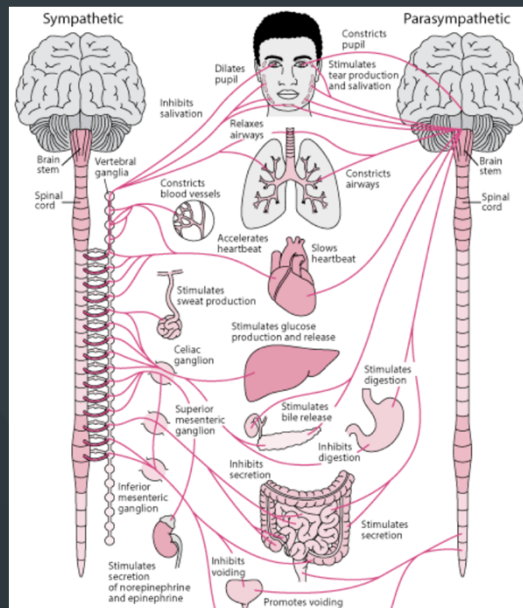
This leads to release of stress hormones: cortisol, epinephrine, and others

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## The autonomic nervous system



**SYMPATHETIC:**  
“Fight or flight”



**PARASYMPATHETIC:**  
“Rest and digest”

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## Some common reactions to stress



- Vague sense of unease
- Irritability, impatience
- Insomnia
- Trouble with decision-making and problem-solving
- Memory issues

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## Some things we use to de-stress (but shouldn't...)



- Denying the problem or feeling
- Numbing the pain through:
  - Alcohol
  - Other drugs
  - Other distracting behaviors



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*"Wow, it's only eleven—that still leaves time for me to ruin tomorrow by staying up doing nothing on the Internet."*



Revenge  
bedtime  
procrastination

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## Self-care 101



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## Start with sleep



- 7-9 hours/day
- Affects mood, anxiety, cognition
- “Time to take out the trash”
- Rx for insomnia: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I)
  - Offered at Nebraska Medicine
  - 4 week online group instruction

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## Get up and get moving

- Exercise is like Miracle-Gro for the brain!
- Helps reduce anxiety, and improve mood
- Improves problem-solving ability
- Helps put things in perspective



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## Perspective-Taking

**THE RIGHT PERSPECTIVE  
MAKES THE IMPOSSIBLE  
POSSIBLE.**



“I'm all right, right now”



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# Spending time in nature

- “Forest bathing” is a form of nature therapy originating in Japan
  - Use all 5 senses
  - Can be done sitting, standing, walking
- Spending time in nature reduces blood pressure, cortisol levels

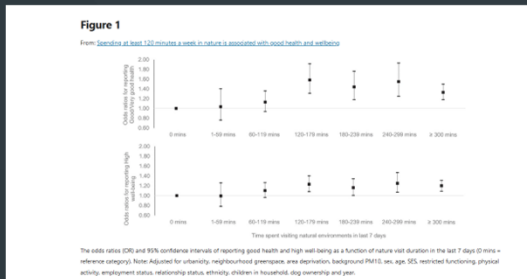


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# Health benefits of being outdoors



- UK study of 20,000 people
- Spending at least 2 hours per week outside associated with higher life satisfaction and perceived general health



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## Build in micro-practices

Try this with me!

6-second breath to reset your autonomic nervous system

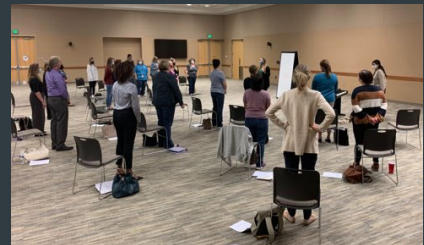
- Count slowly to 6 as you breathe in
- Pause briefly
- Count slowly to 6 as you breathe out
- Repeat 3 more times

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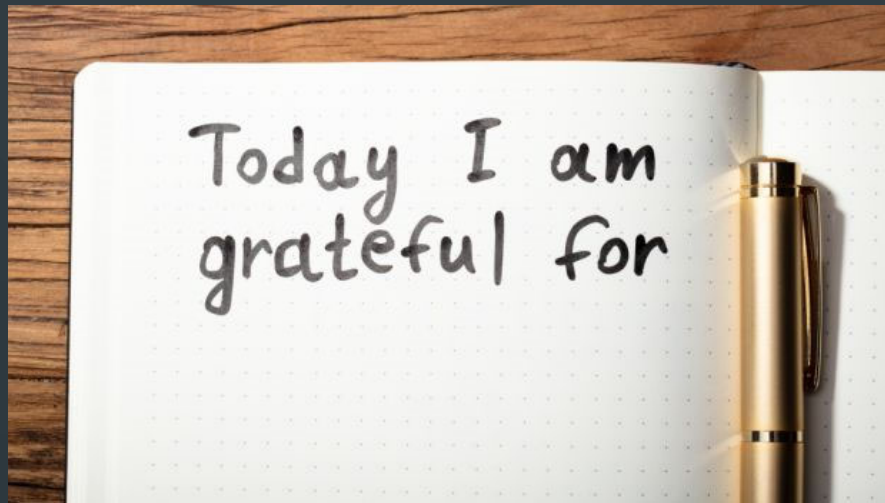
## Use the arts and humanities

- Increases wisdom, perspective, empathy
- Reduces burnout
- Can be **active**:
  - Playing a musical instrument
  - Writing poetry
- Or **passive**:
  - Attending plays and concerts
  - Reading poetry



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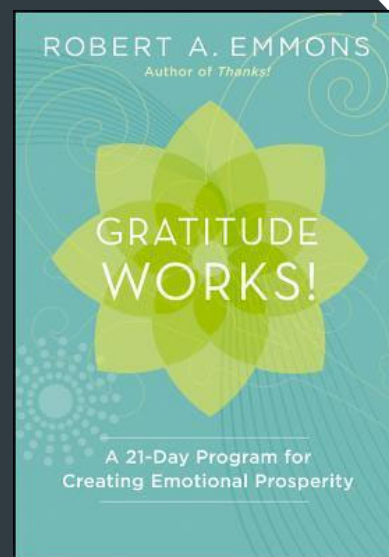
## Keep a gratitude journal



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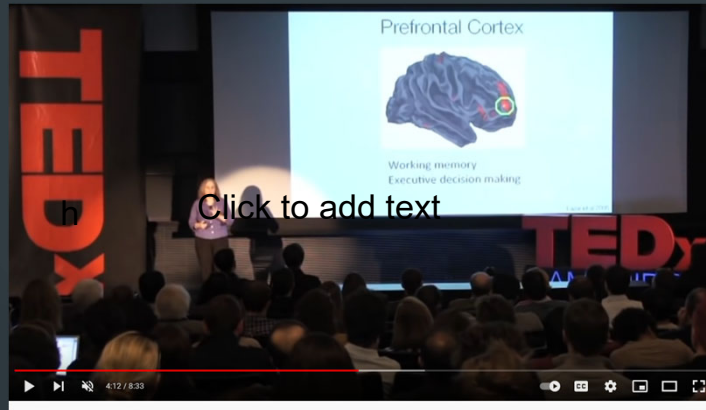
## Be grateful

- Keeping a “gratitude journal” can improve your outlook and even lead to positive brain changes
- How to do it: once or twice a week, write down 3 new things that happened recently that you are grateful for



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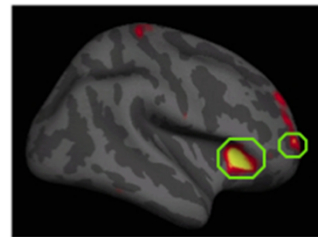
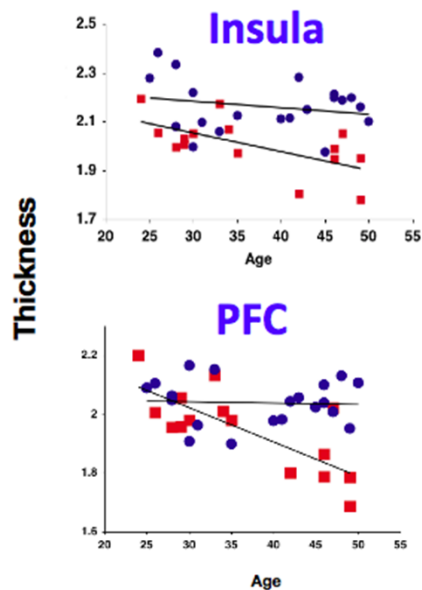
# Consider mindfulness/meditation



Sara Lazar TED Talk

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## Preservation of Cortical Thickness



These graphs show age and cortical thickness of each individual. These figures show brain areas (the insula and the prefrontal cortex (PFC)) that are thicker in practitioners of Insight Meditation than control subjects who do not meditate.

● Meditators

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## A simple way to meditate

- Used at Harvard/MGH for the last 40+ years
  - Focused on the breath
1. Sit quietly with eyes closed, feet on the floor
  2. Take slow, deep breaths
  3. Say the word “One” in a loooooong fashion silently with each exhaled breath
  4. Continue for 10 minutes; don’t set a timer

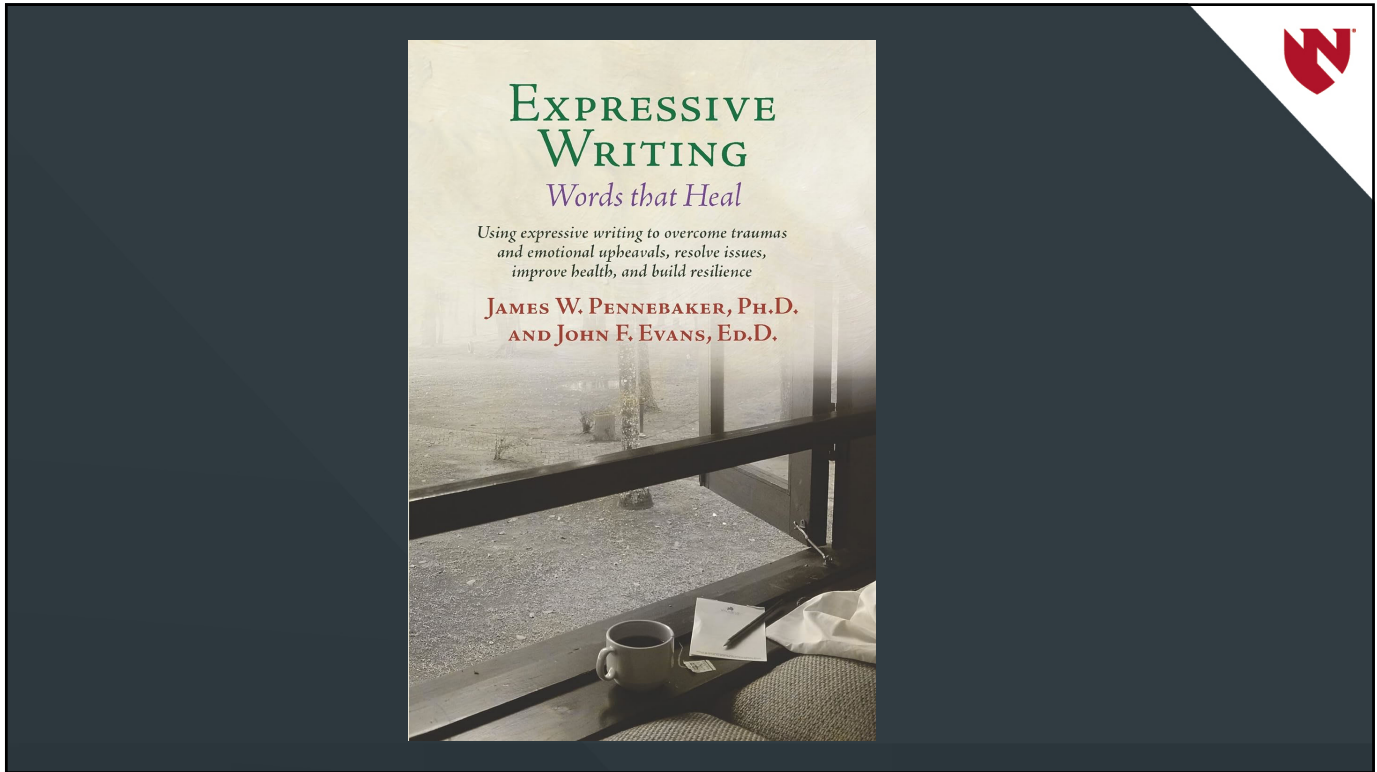
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## Taming anxiety and worry

1. Just be aware of it – “non-judgmental awareness”
2. Put a name to it – “I guess I’m feeling anxious”
3. Keep a feelings journal
4. Set aside “worry time”
5. Focus on the current moment (not the past or future)
  1. This is the essence of mindfulness


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## Smile – it'll make you feel better!

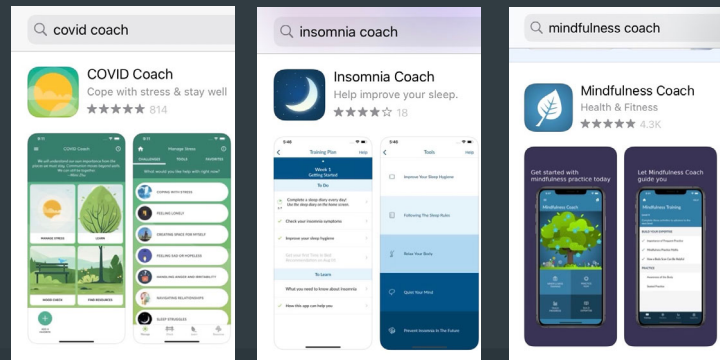
- Experiments with simulating a smile caused people to feel more cheerful
- It's a form of “biofeedback”

A photograph of a white dog, possibly a Golden Retriever, smiling with its mouth open, showing its tongue. The dog is set against a bright yellow background. A red logo is in the top right corner.

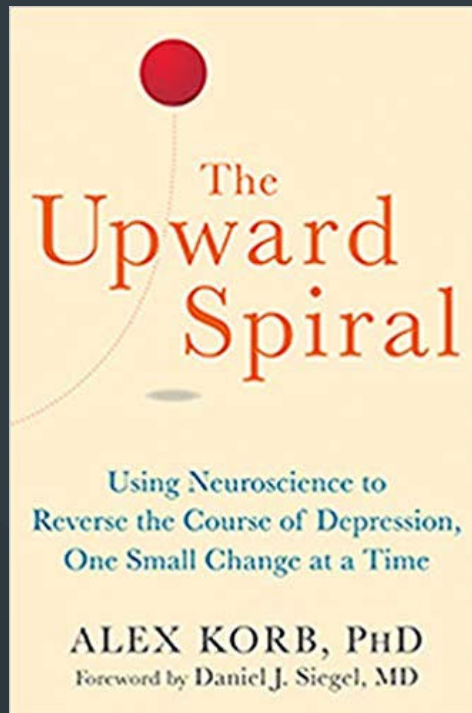
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## Additional resources

- COVID Coach:
  - Mood and anxiety self-check
  - Stress management tools
- Insomnia Coach
- Mindfulness Coach



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## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy



### Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Fear of Recurrence

One approach that could help cancer survivors cope with distress is a newer form of cognitive behavioral therapy called acceptance and commitment therapy, or ACT.

“ACT supports survivors in figuring out what they can change by taking specific actions consistent with their values, yet recognizing the parts of their experience they can’t change,” explained clinical psychologist Shelley Johns, Psy.D., of the Regenstrief Institute and the Indiana University Melvin and Bren Simon Comprehensive Cancer Center.

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## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy



For instance, she said, cancer survivors may always have concerns that the cancer will come back, but ACT can teach skills that help them “live with greater ease with those unchangeable realities.”

In a recent pilot study, Dr. Johns and her colleagues tested whether ACT could help breast cancer survivors better manage their fears of recurrence. Women in the study were randomly assigned to receive either 6 weeks of group-based ACT, a six-session survivorship education workshop, or a 30-minute group coaching session with a booklet on life after cancer treatment.

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## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy



Six months after the intervention, participants in the ACT group reported greater reductions in the severity of their fear of recurrence than women in the other two groups. ACT also reduced anxiety and symptoms of depression at the 6-month follow-up point and improved survivors' quality of life more than the other interventions, Dr. Johns said.

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## Acceptance and Commitment Therapy




With ACT, she continued, “we offer coping skills so that fear is no longer ‘driving the car’ in survivors’ lives. The fear may still be in the car, yet it can ride in the back seat, while survivors keep their hands on the wheel and drive in their preferred direction.” These skills include pursuing meaningful activities, focusing on the present moment (mindfulness), and being kinder to yourself.

<https://www.cancer.gov/news-events/cancer-currents-blog/2020/cancer-survivors-managing-anxiety-distress>

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**WHOLE**  
*(Wellness: How One Lives Effectively)*

This new program for cancer survivors is designed to help patients cope with the many emotional, social and physical challenges that emerge after cancer treatment. It teaches patients a variety of mind, body, positive psychology and cognitive behavioral tools to help enhance their resiliency and overall quality of life. Our goal is to support that transition to help patients feel some control over the uncontrollable.

This program is most suitable for the following patients:

- Individuals who have completed cancer treatment.
- Individuals who are living with cancer as a chronic illness.

What to expect: Groups meet weekly for seven weeks and learn various stress management tools, with each session building on the other. Each session is approximately 90 minutes long. The program is free of charge, but pre-registration is required to secure a spot. The program takes place on Tuesdays from 1 to 2:30 p.m. via Zoom. Additional times/in-person locations may be available per request.

Next program session: **Tuesday, April 30, through Tuesday, June 11**

To reserve a spot: Please contact Rachael Schmidt at [rschmidt@nebraskamed.com](mailto:rschmidt@nebraskamed.com) or call **402.550.1899**.

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## Where can I turn to for support?

- Nebraska Medicine Survivorship Program
- “WHOLE” groups for stress management training
- Survivorship support groups
- Nebraska Medicine Psychology and Psychiatry services
- And many others – please see the brochure for details


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## Summary



- Cancer is a life-changing event
- It's normal to feel anxious, depressed, or overwhelmed at times
- Focusing on some self-help strategies can really help
- Talking with others on this journey is valuable
- Sometimes talking with a mental health provider can make a big difference

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- Uncertain times can make us feel more anxious – this is normal
  - "Name it to tame it" -- acknowledge how you feel and that can help reduce the impact of the stress you are facing
  - Connect with others, safely
  - Get adequate sleep
  - Exercise is helpful
  - Time outdoors can be healing
  - Try meditation and mindfulness

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Take Care...from a professional when you need it

take



Take Care...of others

care

Take Care...of yourself

