

# Cancer Survivors in MIDUS



An individual is considered a cancer survivor from the time of diagnosis through the remainder of life.

## What is Cancer?

- Cancer occurs when the body's cells stop working properly. Instead of dividing to create new cells that replace old or damaged cells, they continue multiplying until they crowd out normal cells, and the normal cells can no longer do their job. This can start anywhere in the body and may spread to other vital systems.
- Scientists are still working to confirm what causes cancer, improve treatment options, and find a cure.



Cancer awareness ribbons, each representing a different type of cancer.

## Risk of Cancer Increases with Age

- Results from MIDUS & other national surveys showed that many are unaware that the chance of getting cancer increases as they get older.
  - This is important because awareness of risk can encourage preventive behaviors (exercise, healthy diet, not smoking).



[Taber, 2017]

# MIDUS

Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

## MIDUS Looks at Life After Cancer

Thank you so much for participating in MIDUS! We are happy to share these newsletters as our way of giving back for your contributions to the study. This issue is about one of the special populations that MIDUS has been following over time—the growing number of people who have survived cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, only 50% of those diagnosed with cancer in the 1970s survived for 5 years. Today, 2 out of 3 (66%) will survive at least that long, **so that there are more than 15.5 million cancer survivors in the U.S.**

Some of them have been part of the MIDUS study.



Survivors face many challenges, including coping with their diagnosis, treatment side-effects, pain management, their own & others' emotional reactions, questions about the meaning of life and fears of death, and worry about cancer reoccurrence.

Because some of these stressors last for years, researchers are examining quality of life among survivors. Although more work is needed to verify the results shared here, we are happy to report that the news so far is not all bleak. **Some survivors have psychological and spiritual strengths that help them go on to lead fulfilling lives.** We hope this research will translate into interventions that will help all survivors do the same.

Sincerely,

Carol D. Ryff, Director  
MIDUS National Study of Health & Well-Being

## Perceived Risk & Happiness

- Those who thought they had a high risk of getting cancer experienced a small but significant reduction in happiness and life satisfaction after getting the disease.
- However, no reductions in happiness were found in survivors who, prior to being diagnosed, thought their chances of getting cancer were low.
- Perhaps those who believe they have less risk feel they have more control over their health, which might contribute to well-being after a cancer diagnosis.



[Persoskie, 2014]

# What is Life Like for Cancer Survivors?

## Work May Suffer

- Most cancer survivors (88%) remained at work after receiving their diagnosis and during part of their treatment.
- However, cancer survivors were four times more likely to get less work done or be out sick, compared to those with other chronic illnesses (ulcers, depression).
- Having cancer also affected work on more days than did other illnesses.
- Results suggested that helping survivors reduce fatigue would help them miss fewer work days.

[Kessler, 2001]



## Arguments are More Significant

- Survivors saw stressful events, particularly arguments with others, as slightly more disruptive than non-survivors.
- Survivors had more bad feelings after arguments and fewer bad feelings when they deliberately avoided arguments.
- Perhaps tension with others is more significant to survivors, either because their illness has made them value their relationships more, or because it has put more strain on their friends, family, and caregivers.

[Costanzo, 2012]



## Adjustment is Worse Among Younger Survivors & Those with Previous Problems

- Cancer survivors reported:
  - worse mental health (greater anxiety, depression)
  - worse mood (more negative & less positive emotions)
  - lower psychological well-being, such as less self-acceptance.
- However, those reporting worse mood and lower well-being were also found to be low on these measures before they got cancer. Perhaps poor mood promotes behaviors that increase risk of cancer (smoking, lack of exercise). Alternatively, behaviors that promote cancer may also lower mood.
- Poor adjustment was most pronounced among younger survivors. Older adults were more likely to function as well as others their same age.
- Young adults may find cancer more distressing because they do not expect to have a serious disease at their age and are less likely to have friends who are cancer survivors to offer them support.

[Costanzo, 2009]

## Daily Stress Does Not Increase

On stressful days, cancer survivors experienced:

- similar amounts & types of stressful events (at work, home, school)
  - similar amounts of physical symptoms (aches or pains, stomach upset)
- compared to those with no cancer history, suggesting that survivors were not more vulnerable to daily stress than non-survivors.

[Costanzo, 2012]



## Life is Still Satisfying

- Overall life satisfaction among survivors did not significantly decline compared to those without cancer. Satisfaction with physical health and sex life dropped, but satisfaction with all other areas remained steady or improved.
- However, cancer survivors were more pessimistic about their future satisfaction (with life, finances, marriage), but remained optimistic about relationships with their children.
- Comparisons with actual satisfaction ten years later showed that survivors' predictions were more accurate compared to those without cancer, who were less satisfied than they expected to be.
- More research is needed to determine if this realism is helpful to survivors. Optimism has been linked to better physical health, but a healthy amount of pessimism might also improve mental health when bracing for bad news, such as possible reoccurrence of cancer.

[Ellis, 2019]



## Still Improving with Age

- In spite of challenges, survivors reported doing as well as non-survivors with regard to:
  - social well-being (believing society is improving, having a sense of community)
  - personal growth (trying new things, realizing one's potential)
  - spiritual life (religious practices, daily spiritual experiences)
- Over time, survivors also showed improvements similar to non-survivors (they were happier, had better relationships), indicating that having cancer did not diminish improvements in well-being that many experience as they age.

[Costanzo, 2009]

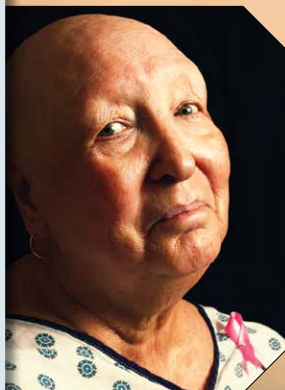
## Optimism & Control Promote Better Health

- Cancer survivors who were more optimistic (expecting the best in uncertain times) had:
  - more positive emotions (enthusiasm)
  - fewer negative emotions (sadness, anger)
  - less anxiety, especially among women.
- Women who were more optimistic felt more in control of their physical health.
- Survivors who were both optimistic and had a higher sense of control:
  - used more effective coping methods (actively improving a situation, rather than denying or venting negative emotions)
  - reported being in better health.

[Gallagher, 2019]

Once I overcame  
breast cancer,  
I wasn't afraid of  
anything anymore.

✧ *Melissa  
Etheridge*



Don't count the days.  
Make the days count.

✧ *Muhammad Ali*



# Spiritual Factors Can Influence Life After Cancer

## Survivors May Become More Religious



- Getting a cancer diagnosis was associated with becoming more religious or spiritual (attending church, praying, meditating). Other research has linked religious beliefs to being optimistic about early cancer treatment and following treatment guidelines.
- Those diagnosed at a younger age became more religious than those diagnosed at an older age, perhaps because cancer can be more disruptive to younger adults. It may threaten their ability to

make a living or raise children, whereas older retirees may have fewer of these types of worries.

[McFarland, 2013]

## Spiritual Experiences Can Increase Happiness

- Having more daily spiritual experiences improved life satisfaction among survivors who began with low satisfaction.
- Spiritual experiences did not reduce negative emotions, but did increase positive emotions (being enthusiastic, proud) among men who initially reported fewer positive emotions.
- Daily spiritual experiences included feeling a strong connection to all of life and being deeply moved by its beauty, feelings of inner peace or deep appreciation, or a profound sense of caring for others.
- Ways to increase these experiences include having natural views from hospital rooms, hiking in nature, singing in a group, or reading spiritual books.



[Rudaz, 2019]

We shall draw from  
the heart of suffering itself  
the means of inspiration and survival.

∞ *Winston Churchill*

## Spiritual Mindfulness Can Encourage Personal Growth

- Although dealing with cancer is traumatic, facing one's own mortality can sometimes trigger a reevaluation of life goals and priorities that results in beneficial growth.
- Survivors who sought comfort through religion or spirituality (prayer, talking to a religious advisor) *and* who were more mindful, experienced more personal growth.



- Survivors were considered more mindful if they reported that because of their religion or spirituality they:
  - were more engaged in the present moment
  - perceived things in new ways
  - were more aware of different ways to solve problems
  - were more tolerant, patient, and sensitive to the feelings of others.

[Rudaz, 2018]

## Please Stay in Touch

Send updates in your address,  
phone(s), and/or email(s) to:

MIDUS– Institute on Aging  
University of Wisconsin-Madison  
2245 MSC, 1300 University Ave.  
Madison, WI 53706  
608.262.2056 • [aging@ssc.wisc.edu](mailto:aging@ssc.wisc.edu)

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Publications about cancer,  
including those summarized here,  
can be found on our website:

**[MIDUS.wisc.edu](http://MIDUS.wisc.edu)**