

You're not alone:

How connecting with others facing cancer can help



As valuable as friends and loved ones are to you right now, it may help to have the support of people who are also in treatment for cancer, and will understand what you're going through and how you're feeling. That's what you will find in a support group. From participants, you can learn more about what to expect during your treatment and coping skills. And you can expect to develop a camaraderie that only comes from a shared experience.

Is a support group right for you?

The operative word here is *group*. Not everyone is comfortable in a group setting, especially if the group is a peer group that meets largely for the purpose of sharing feelings and concerns. Although the peer group is the most common type of cancer support group, for some, this type of group may seem to encroach too much on one's privacy. Confidentiality can be a concern, too. Group members should feel assured that whatever they discuss in the group will remain confidential. Still others may be so upset about their current situation that the idea of discussing it with others could make it worse.

For people struggling with these kinds of feelings, support from an individual counselor may be a more comfortable option. Alternatively, a different type of group may be a better choice – such as one that focuses on medical information. Called educational groups, these might include a presentation by an authority on a specific topic, followed by a question and answer session. Another choice might be to go ahead and join a peer-type group, and to simply listen and learn from others. In time, you may wish to share with others, or you may not. Usually, however, group members gradually feel more comfortable in discussing their concerns, and they get satisfaction from helping others in the group.

There's no right or wrong way to feel about participating in a group. And even if you don't feel one is right for you now, you may feel differently later. What's more, you may want to try several different groups before settling into one.

A support group can:

- Provide connection in an experience that can feel isolating
- Provide support in hard times
- Provide information and coping skills
- Make you feel less helpless about yourself and others because you're able to help others
- Offer tips that only people with cancer can provide
- Allow you to share powerful emotions

What types of groups are there?

There are a large variety of groups to choose from, so there will very likely be one or two that will meet your needs and personality.

In general, support groups are either open-ended groups or closed groups. Open-ended groups allow anyone to attend – people in treatment for cancer, cancer survivors, caregivers, or family members and friends. Attendees may come and go freely, attending for as long or short a time as needed. Flexibility is a key advantage of this type of group. If you are unable to commit regularly to a group, this type might be perfect for your situation.

Closed groups include the same group of people meeting for a prescribed period of time. An advantage of this type is that members get to know one another well.

Some of these groups are organized by topic, with a different topic as the focus of each meeting. Other groups follow a free-flowing format, where participants may discuss whatever topic they choose.

Cancer survivors facilitate some groups, while licensed professionals – such as oncology social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychiatric or oncology nurses, or clergy – facilitate others.

The most common cancer support group is called a peer support group. As the title implies, this type of group consists of those who have similar experiences – in your case, the experience of caregiving. Shared experiences and information form the glue that quickly bonds people in these groups. Peer groups can provide comfort, companionship, and a safe place to go with fear, guilt, pain, and depression. Not only is the peer network supportive, it can also be fun.

Another type of group, educational groups, focus on medical information, while another type, coping skill groups, focus on practical skills to help your loved one better deal with cancer, such as exercise and relaxation techniques.

There are also telephone support groups that may be helpful if you are unable to participate face-to-face. What's more, there are now many online groups, which have some distinct advantages. (See the article in this newsletter on online groups).

How can you find a support group?

American Cancer Society local offices maintain listings of cancer resources in your neighborhood, including support groups. The Society can also give you comprehensive cancer information, as well as put you in touch with services in your own community.

To find your local American Cancer Society office, click [here](#) and enter your zip code or city and state. This will give you the contact information for your local office. When you call, the office will put you in touch with Society-sponsored support groups, as well as other support groups in your area.

Your local hospitals and community agencies may also have caregiver support groups as well.

[Learn More](#)

[Click here to get more information on this subject from the American Cancer Society's online bookstore.](#)

**For more cancer information, call 1-800-ACS-2345
or visit www.cancer.org, anytime, day or night.**

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National Home Office, 1599 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, Georgia 30329