

## Review Article

# Beyond treatment: navigating existential reflections in the cancer survivorship journey

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### ABSTRACT

This narrative review explores the intricate intersection of cancer survivorship and existential reflections, acknowledging the profound impact on the overall well-being and quality of life for survivors. As advances in treatment increase survival rates, understanding the psychosocial aspects of survivorship becomes crucial. This review examines how existential concerns evolve through the phases of survivorship, focusing on themes such as fear of recurrence, reassessment of life priorities, and the quest for renewed purpose. It also investigates the influence of social support, cultural and spiritual beliefs, and mental health on these reflections. By evaluating existing support services and interventions, the review highlights successful strategies and identifies areas for improvement. Recommendations are proposed for integrating existential considerations into survivorship care, emphasizing the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive support to enhance survivors' quality of life and foster resilience and personal growth.

**Keywords:** Cancer survivorship, Existential reflections, Psychosocial aspects, Fear of recurrence, Quality of life, Holistic care

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, significant progress in cancer treatment has resulted in a notable rise in the number of individuals who have survived cancer. The journey through diagnosis, treatment, and post-treatment has evolved into a dynamic concept known as cancer survivorship. This evolving landscape goes beyond the completion of treatment, acknowledging that survivorship is a distinct phase characterized by unique challenges and opportunities for personal growth.<sup>1</sup> The concept of survivorship has transitioned from a mere medical follow-up to a holistic approach that recognizes the multidimensional impact of cancer on individuals. As we witness a growing population of cancer survivors, it becomes increasingly crucial to delve into the psychosocial aspects of their experiences.<sup>2,3</sup> Central to this exploration is the understanding of existential reflections, recognizing the profound impact they have on

the overall well-being and quality of life of cancer survivors.<sup>4</sup> It is crucial to address the existential worries of cancer survivors in order to offer comprehensive survivorship care. While medical interventions focus on treating the disease, an understanding of existential reflections contributes to a more comprehensive approach. These reflections encompass a range of themes, including the fear of recurrence, reassessment of life priorities, and the quest for a renewed sense of purpose and meaning.<sup>5</sup>

By acknowledging and addressing these existential concerns, healthcare professionals can support survivors not only in managing the medical aspects of their journey but also in navigating the complex emotional and existential terrain that follows. The purpose of this narrative review is to explore the intricate intersection of cancer survivorship and existential reflections. By examining the existing literature and synthesizing key

insights, this review aims to shed light on the nuanced experiences of cancer survivors. Through a comprehensive analysis, we seek to answer key questions, such as: How do existential concerns evolve throughout the phases of survivorship? What psychosocial factors influence the existential reflections of cancer survivors? How effective are existing healthcare interventions in addressing existential concerns, and what recommendations can be made to enhance survivorship care programs? By embarking on this narrative exploration, we aspire to contribute to a deeper understanding of the holistic needs of cancer survivors, fostering a foundation for enhanced survivorship care and ultimately improving the overall quality of life for those who have triumphed over cancer.

## **THE CANCER SURVIVORSHIP JOURNEY: NAVIGATING BEYOND TREATMENT**

### ***Cancer survivorship***

In 1986, the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship established an early definition of a cancer survivor, stating that an individual is considered a cancer survivor from the moment of diagnosis and continues to be one for the rest of their life. Cancer survivorship, a term with evolving connotations, captures the diverse experiences of individuals who have confronted and triumphed over cancer. The national cancer institute (NCI) refined the definition of survivorship to encompass the health and life of an individual after cancer treatment, continuing until the end of life. This inclusive definition covers the full range of the cancer experience—diagnosis, treatment, remission, monitoring, post-cancer care, and end of life. It also recognizes that caregivers, family members, and friends play significant roles in the cancer journey and are therefore also regarded as survivors.<sup>1,6</sup> This evolving concept acknowledges survivorship not merely as a static condition but as a dynamic process, characterized by ongoing adjustments and personal growth.

Varying definitions and perspectives on survivorship reflect the multidimensional nature of the cancer experience. From a medical standpoint, survivorship encompasses the time after the completion of primary cancer treatment, often marked by regular follow-up care and monitoring for potential recurrence. However, survivorship is more expansively defined by survivors themselves, encapsulating the myriad financial, physical, psycho-social, and existential facets of life beyond cancer diagnosis and treatment.

## **PHASES OF SURVIVORSHIP (FROM DIAGNOSIS TO POST-TREATMENT)**

Cancer survivorship encompasses three key phases: acute, extended, and permanent survivorship. The acute phase begins with diagnosis and continues through initial treatment, focusing on managing side effects and emotional responses like fear and hope. The extended

phase starts post-treatment and involves monitoring for recurrence, managing long-term side effects, and reintegrating into normal life, rebuilding their lives, navigating potential changes in relationships, employment, and overall identity. Finally, the permanent phase, marked by an extended period of remission, involves long-term survivors who are disease-free for several years, prompts ongoing adaptation to the physical and emotional aftermath of cancer.<sup>7,8</sup>

Each phase introduces unique challenges and reflections, emphasizing the need for continuous, tailored support to address both physical and psychological aspects of survivorship.

## **CHALLENGES FACED BY CANCER SURVIVORS DURING AND AFTER TREATMENT**

The challenges faced by cancer survivors are complex and multifaceted, extending well into the survivorship phase. Physically, survivors may struggle with the lingering effects of treatment, which can include fatigue, pain, and long-term health concerns.<sup>9</sup> Emotionally, the psychological impact of the cancer experience often persists, leading to conditions such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress.<sup>10</sup> Psychosocial challenges, such as changes in relationships, employment, and financial stability, further complicate the survivorship journey.<sup>11</sup> These challenges collectively form an intricate tapestry that significantly impacts the quality of life for survivors, necessitating comprehensive and tailored support to address their diverse needs.<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, these challenges have a profound impact on existential reflections. The fear of recurrence looms large, influencing daily decisions and perspectives on the future.<sup>13</sup> Reassessment of life priorities becomes a critical task, as survivors navigate questions of purpose, identity, and personal fulfillment. Acknowledging and addressing these challenges is paramount, as they form the foundation upon which existential reflections are built.<sup>14,15</sup>

In essence, the cancer survivorship journey is a nuanced expedition through varied phases, each laden with its own challenges and reflections. Recognizing survivorship as a dynamic, ongoing process allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the holistic needs of individuals who have overcome cancer, paving the way for tailored support and improved survivorship care.

## **EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS IN CANCER SURVIVORSHIP: NAVIGATING LIFE BEYOND DIAGNOSIS**

Existential concerns in the context of cancer survivorship encompass the profound and often introspective reflections on the nature of existence, purpose, and personal meaning that arise as individuals traverse the journey from diagnosis through treatment to post-

treatment phases. These concerns transcend the purely medical aspects of survivorship, delving into the emotional, psychological, and philosophical dimensions of one's experience. They encapsulate the essence of what it means to confront mortality, adapt to changes, and seek meaning amid the complex tapestry of life after cancer.<sup>16</sup>

The literature addresses two states in existential reflections: existential suffering and existential health. Existential suffering impacts the body, soul, and spirit, stemming from challenges to one's existence and identity, thoughts of death, and a sense of meaninglessness, grief, and loneliness. Conversely, existential health involves personal growth, newfound appreciation for life, and a sense of connectedness and fulfilment. The relationship between these states is debated: some view them as dichotomous, while others see them as part of a continuous, dialectical movement, suggesting a progression from suffering toward health over time. The coexistence of these states remains unclear.<sup>17</sup> Survivors often strive to make meaning and regain their self-identity while navigating these existential challenges. Addressing these existential issues is crucial for the overall well-being of cancer survivors, as they seek to find purpose and personal fulfilment in their lives post-cancer.<sup>18,19</sup>

## **IDENTIFICATION OF COMMON EXISTENTIAL THEMES IN CANCER SURVIVORSHIP**

### ***Fear of recurrence and death anxiety***

The fear of cancer recurrence and death anxiety emerge as a pervasive existential theme in survivorship. Fear of cancer recurrence is a type of psychological distress experienced to varying extents by most cancer patients.<sup>20</sup> It is defined by the apprehension that the disease may return or worsen. The intense fear of death, coupled with a strong will to survive, creates a deeply terrifying experience for cancer patients. These individuals confront numerous obstacles and are profoundly aware of their susceptibility to mortality. This apprehension about death or events beyond it is commonly known as death anxiety.<sup>21</sup> This fear, while natural, can infiltrate various aspects of daily life, influencing decision-making, relationships, and overall well-being. Coping mechanisms become crucial in managing this fear, ranging from regular medical check-ups to mindfulness practices, cognitive behavioral therapy, acceptance and commitment therapy and support groups.<sup>22</sup> Understanding the nuances of fear and the diverse strategies employed by survivors provides insight into the intricate balance between vigilance and maintaining a fulfilling life.

### ***Reassessment of life priorities***

Survivorship prompts a profound reassessment of life priorities, often leading to shifts in values, relationships, and goals. This reassessment involves both challenges and positive transformations. Survivors may face body image concerns, self-esteem issues, and sexual

difficulties.<sup>23,24</sup> These challenges require resilience and adaptability to navigate post-treatment complexities.

However, survivorship also brings positive changes. Many survivors experience a deeper appreciation for life, stronger relationships, and new priorities, showcasing significant personal growth.<sup>25</sup> This transformation process, known as post-traumatic growth, highlights the potential for finding renewed purpose and meaning in life after cancer.<sup>26</sup> Understanding these shifts provides valuable insights into the adaptability and resilience of survivors, emphasizing their capacity for growth amidst adversity.

### ***Sense of purpose and meaning***

Investigating how survivorship influences one's sense of purpose and meaning reveals significant existential reflections. Overcoming cancer often leads to a re-evaluation of life's purpose and a heightened appreciation for meaningful experiences. Support systems, spiritual beliefs, and personal resilience are key factors in fostering positive existential reflections.

Support from family, friends, and healthcare providers helps survivors cope with post-treatment challenges, enhancing their sense of purpose.<sup>27</sup> Engagement in support groups further promotes a sense of belonging and purpose. Spiritual beliefs provide comfort and meaning, helping survivors make sense of their experiences and deepening their understanding of life.<sup>28,29</sup> Personal resilience—characterized by adaptability and a positive outlook—enables survivors to transform adversity into opportunities for growth.<sup>30</sup>

Understanding these factors highlights the diverse paths survivors take toward finding renewed purpose and meaning after cancer, emphasizing the individuality of the survivorship experience.

In essence, existential concerns in cancer survivorship transcend the physical aspects of the disease, delving into the intricate fabric of human experience. Acknowledging and understanding these concerns is integral to providing comprehensive support, fostering resilience, and facilitating the transformative journey of life after cancer.

## **PSYCHOSOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING EXISTENTIAL REFLECTIONS IN CANCER SURVIVORSHIP: NURTURING CONNECTIONS AND RESILIENCE**

### ***Role of social support in shaping existential perspectives***

Social support is crucial in shaping existential perspectives during cancer survivorship. Relationships with family, friends, and peers provide emotional sustenance, understanding, and a sense of belonging, essential for navigating post-treatment life. Family support plays a vital role, offering practical help and

emotional encouragement, which can alleviate isolation and anxiety.<sup>31,32</sup> Friends help maintain a sense of normalcy and connection to pre-diagnosis life.<sup>33</sup> Peer support groups offer understanding and validation, reducing loneliness and fostering camaraderie.<sup>34,35</sup> Community support, including broader social networks and organizations, reinforces a sense of belonging and purpose.<sup>36,37</sup> Participating in community events or support groups enhances resilience and outlook on life.

### ***Influence of cultural and spiritual beliefs on survivors' reflections***

Cultural and spiritual beliefs significantly shape the existential reflections of cancer survivors, influencing their coping strategies and interpretation of their experiences. Cultural practices and faith-based systems provide frameworks that offer comfort and meaning, affecting emotional and psychological responses.<sup>38</sup> Cultural beliefs often dictate perceptions of illness and recovery, emphasizing communal support and resilience, which bolster a survivor's sense of belonging and purpose.

Rituals and practices help survivors process their experiences and find peace.<sup>39-41</sup> Spiritual inclinations foster understanding, appreciation, and a sense of meaning. They provide hope, serenity, and compassion, reduce feelings of loneliness, boost self-esteem, improve communication skills, enhance psychological resilience, and promote a holistic view of well-being. Practices like prayer and meditation can reduce anxiety and depression, enhancing well-being.<sup>41</sup>

Understanding these beliefs is crucial for culturally sensitive care, validating survivors' experiences and integrating their cultural and spiritual resources into the healing process.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Impact of mental health and coping mechanisms***

The relationship between mental health and existential well-being is complex and dynamic. Mental health significantly influences how survivors handle existential issues. Coping mechanisms such as mindfulness practices, psychotherapy, creative activities, and support groups are essential. These strategies highlight the resilience of the human spirit and provide valuable insights for healthcare professionals to improve survivorship care.<sup>43,44</sup>

Mindfulness practices like meditation and yoga help reduce anxiety and foster peace. Psychotherapy offers a structured environment to process emotions and develop coping skills.<sup>44,45</sup> Creative outlets like art and music promote healing and personal growth.<sup>46</sup> Support groups offer communal spaces for sharing experiences and receiving encouragement.<sup>47</sup> Integrating these coping strategies into survivorship care supports mental health and existential well-being, acknowledging the

multifaceted nature of recovery and the importance of addressing both concerns for a fulfilling post-cancer life.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

### ***Review of existing support services for cancer survivors***

Conducting a thorough review of the current support services for cancer survivors reveals a varied landscape of survivorship programs, counselling services, and community initiatives designed to meet the complex needs of survivors beyond their treatment phase. Identifying and understanding the range of available resources is essential for customizing support to individual needs.

Despite the variety of services, accessibility remains a key issue. Evaluating the reach and effectiveness of existing support systems ensures that these services are available to a broad demographic of survivors, addressing potential gaps in availability and catering to the diverse needs of this population.

### ***Assessment of the effectiveness of interventions addressing existential concerns***

Investigating interventions focused on the existential dimensions of survivorship provides valuable insights into approaches aimed at addressing profound reflections on life, purpose, and meaning.

Evaluating outcomes and success metrics is crucial for determining the effectiveness of these interventions in enhancing existential well-being. This assessment not only highlights successful strategies but also identifies areas needing improvement. Understanding the impact of these interventions is critical for refining survivorship care models, enabling healthcare professionals to deliver more tailored and effective support.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING SURVIVORSHIP CARE PROGRAMS**

Enhancing current survivorship care models requires a comprehensive approach. Recommendations include.

### ***Bolstering existing support services***

#### *Identify accessibility improvements*

Conduct needs assessments and expand service locations, particularly in underserved areas, while increasing the availability of telehealth services and offering flexible scheduling.

#### *Tailor programs to diverse demographics*

Provide cultural competency training for healthcare providers, develop customized programs for various



demographic groups, and ensure language services are available.

#### *Foster collaboration*

Establish interdisciplinary care teams, partner with community organizations, and employ patient navigators to assist survivors in accessing needed services.

#### **Integrating existential considerations**

##### *Develop targeted interventions*

Offer psychosocial counselling, facilitate support groups, and create educational resources focused on existential issues.

##### *Incorporate survivor narratives*

Develop narrative-based educational materials, organize workshops and seminars for survivors to share their experiences, and produce media content showcasing diverse survivor stories.

#### **Promoting holistic well-being**

##### *Physical health*

Implement personalized follow-up care plans and provide access to physical rehabilitation services.

##### *Mental health*

Integrate routine mental health screenings into survivorship care and ensure access to specialized mental health professionals.

##### *Social support*

Offer family counselling, organize community events, and promote social activities that enhance community bonding among survivors.

##### *Spiritual and religious support*

Include spiritual care services that respect and support the diverse religious and spiritual needs of survivors.

Collaborate with spiritual and religious leaders to offer counselling and support tailored to the survivor's beliefs and practices.

##### *Respecting cultural diversity*

Ensure that survivorship care respects cultural diversity by incorporating culturally appropriate practices and understanding different cultural perspectives on health and healing.

#### **Continuous evaluation and improvement**

##### *Feedback mechanisms*

Regularly collect and utilize feedback from survivors to continuously improve the quality of survivorship care services.

##### *Research and innovation*

Support ongoing research into new interventions and stay informed about innovative practices and technologies that can enhance survivorship care. By adopting these recommendations, survivorship care models can be significantly improved, ensuring that cancer survivors receive comprehensive, compassionate, and effective care tailored to their unique needs.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The journey of cancer survivorship is a complex and dynamic process that extends beyond medical treatment into profound existential reflections. Survivors grapple with challenges such as fear of recurrence, reassessment of life priorities, and a quest for renewed purpose and meaning. Understanding these existential concerns is crucial for holistic survivorship care. Social support, cultural and spiritual beliefs, and mental health significantly influence survivors' coping mechanisms and overall well-being.

Effective interventions, including mindfulness practices, psychotherapy, creative outlets, and support groups, are essential in addressing these concerns. By integrating these strategies into survivorship care, healthcare professionals can enhance the quality of life for survivors, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of recovery. Continuous evaluation and improvement of support services, coupled with culturally sensitive care, are necessary to meet the diverse needs of cancer survivors, fostering resilience, personal growth, and a renewed sense of purpose.

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