

Social Support and Your Health

Friendship improves happiness and abates misery by doubling our joy and dividing our grief.
(Joseph Addison)

Social support – having friends, family and others in your life to help and comfort you – improves your social dimension of health. When you or someone you love has been diagnosed with cancer, you may feel afraid, alone or confused. Having people around who care about you can help you feel better and more in control of your feelings.

How does social support improve my health?

No one knows for sure why social support improves health, but many believe it is related to stress. When a person's body is under stress, either from physical demands, such as a job, or from an illness, changes happen in the body that lead to poor health. It is believed that social support can help lower stress, which then improves health.

Support from your friends, family and community members can improve your health in many ways. Research has shown that people who have close, personal relationships with friends and family live longer.



Social support is also important for those who are already sick. Several studies with cancer patients found that patients with the most social support lived longer than those patients with the least amount of social support.

Where can I find social support?

Support can come from many people, such as family, friends, church members, neighbors and co-workers. You may find different people provide you with different types of support. Some people are good listeners, while others know how to make you laugh. Ask yourself, “What type of support do I want?” and “Who can provide that?”

Sometimes, though, it can be hard to talk with your family and friends about your feelings. You may feel like they will judge you, or they won't understand what you are going through. In times like these, support groups can help.

Support Groups

In support groups, you find people who are going through the same thing you are. They can provide emotional support, letting you know they care about you and are listening to you. Group members can also provide practical information and tips about things they have learned along the way. For example, group members may recommend a good resource on managing side effects or give suggestions on where to shop for scarves and hats.

The key is finding a support group that meets your needs. Think about what is important to you. Will you feel more comfortable meeting with people like you, perhaps of the same gender, age or with the same cancer diagnosis? What matters to you most? Do you need to meet with a group near your home or work? Do you prefer a certain day and time? Once you have an idea of the type of support group you want, you can begin looking for a group that meets your needs.

To find a support group:

- Ask your health care provider, such as your doctor, nurse or social worker.
- Contact organizations, such as the American Cancer Society or The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.
- Ask other patients if they have attended a group that has been helpful.

If you are unsure about support groups or don't think they are right for you, the best way to find out is to attend a meeting. If you don't find the group useful or comfortable, you don't have to return.

A friend is someone who knows all about you and loves you just the same. (Elbert Hubbard)



Resources

Integrative Medicine Clinic

M. D. Anderson's Integrative Medicine Clinic helps patients improve their quality of life by focusing on three dimensions of health - social, mind-spirit and body. Many support groups meet at the Place of wellness. For more information about the Integrative Medicine Clinic or Place of wellness programs, please call 713-794-4700 or visit www.mdanderson.org/placeofwellness.

Department of Social Work

Professionally trained social workers facilitate support groups at M. D. Anderson for patients and family members. To find out if there is a support group that meets your needs, please call the Department of Social Work at 713-792-6195.