

Cancer patients suffer from PTSD, too

The words post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, conjures up images of survivors of combat, rape or mass shooting incidents.

But a recent study published in *Cancer*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Cancer Society, found that more than one in five cancer patients — 22 percent — experience PTSD in the months after their cancer diagnosis. Some people continue to suffer years later, even when their cancer is in remission.

Effects of PTSD in cancer patients

UCI Health social workers Courtney Sparkuhl, MSW, and Marlyn Tavira, MSW, see the effects of PTSD daily in the patients they care for at the UC Irvine Chao Family Comprehensive Cancer Center:

- Some patients are so plagued by intrusive thoughts re-living the trauma of their cancer diagnosis and treatment that they suffer emotional distress to the point of becoming physically ill before a blood draw or chemotherapy session.
- Others who are struggling to accept the reality of their disease avoid aspects of it, and may even have trouble recalling the details of their cancer, their diagnoses or treatments.
- Still others become obsessively focused on the details of their treatments or worry that tiny changes in their body signal a return of the cancer.
- Some may feel so hopeless they fail to show up for appointments or continue with treatment. [How to recognize when you're depressed >](#)

“It can be difficult to distinguish normal fears from PTSD,” says Sparkuhl. “The key is whether it’s impairing that person’s functioning.”

Sparkuhl and Tavira screen patients for indications of PTSD — avoidance, hypervigilance and signs the patient may be re-experiencing a trauma. Those who show symptoms are referred for treatment and support. The social workers also share these PTSD indicators with their patients and caregivers so they’ll be better equipped to recognize the behaviors and be more inclined to seek help.

Sometimes, Sparkuhl says, all it takes is giving patients a safe space to talk, a place where they can open up and vent without fear of further burdening their family members or other caregivers.

Tips for cancer patients and caregivers

Sparkuhl and Tavira offer the following tips for cancer patients and their caregivers:

- A cancer diagnosis can be so overwhelming that a patient finds it hard to navigate the treatment process. It’s useful for caregivers to help make the patient’s appointments, accompany them to doctor visits and take notes and ask questions to help clarify information.
- With so much out of a cancer patient’s control, it’s important to focus on what they can control, such as spending time doing something they enjoy, such as a hobby like photography, journaling or reading — activities that can help maintain a sense of self.

- Often people become immobilized by obsessing over “What if?” questions. Concentrating on staying in the moment and tackling small goals offers a sense of accomplishment that can be useful in getting unstuck.
- Feelings of isolation can be overcome by taking advantage of many resources from therapy to medicines to support groups, one-to-one buddies matched by cancer diagnosis, crisis intervention, grief counseling, mindfulness and meditation.
- Family members can help by bringing meals or just sitting with the patient.
- Family members who recognize the signs of PTSD can encourage their loved one to seek help.
- It’s also critical for caregivers to acknowledge their own anxiety and get help if needed, so that the people they’re caring for don’t feel they have to care for their caregivers.

UCI Health offers a wide range of resources to help cancer patients — and their caregivers — navigate the process, from diagnosis to treatment to survivorship.

“Finding out how to best help patients sometimes means really having a conversation with them,” says Tavira. “They often know what works for them.”