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Helping Patients Cope With Blood Cancer:

A Practitioner's Guide to Patient Communication and Support

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Supporting Your Patients' Well-Being

Patients with blood cancer experience unique mental and emotional challenges that require a holistic care approach.

This guide provides:

- Strategies to foster empathetic and open communication customized to specific patient personalities
- Tips to assess and support your patients' mental health needs through their treatment journey
- Ways to encourage patients to participate in lifestyle changes that can support their emotional and mental well-being

! The information in this guide is intended to provide you with helpful context and additional approaches to help you support your patients' mental health journey. Please continue to refer patients to mental health specialists as appropriate in your practice.

Patients With Blood Cancer Can Experience Emotional Difficulties

Receiving a blood cancer diagnosis is a life-changing event.[1,2] Over time, a patient's emotions may change from denial, anxiety, and frustration to acceptance and moving forward.[1,2] Studies have shown that patients with blood cancer are at risk for developing negative mental health conditions.[3] Using mental health screeners as part of routine care and providing psychosocial support for these patients may help improve outcomes.[4,5]

Psychosocial Considerations Relevant in Blood Cancer

Up to 47% of patients reported **anxiety symptoms** throughout diagnosis, treatment, and recovery[6]

Lack of sleep (<6 hours per night) was significantly associated with increased anxiety and depression[4]

Face-to-face psychosocial interventions (eg, cognitive-based therapy) significantly improved depression, anxiety, and health-related quality of life[5]

Positive emotional and physical well-being, optimism, and vitality were correlated with longer survival and lower mortality[7]

Patients receiving treatment as well as those in active surveillance reported feelings of anxiety and **depression**[3]:

Personalizing Communication for Your Patients

Fostering a positive patient-centered communication style addresses the specific needs of each patient, while enhancing patient satisfaction, improving adherence to management recommendations, and enhancing their overall well-being.[8]

Communication Strategies for Common Patient Personalities[9]

Doctor Knows Best

Patients who accept the recommendations of their care team with little hesitation

- Clearly outline the recommended course of action
- Demonstrate empathy by recommending what you would do if your parent or loved one were in their situation

Anxious Waiters

Patients who are worried about the next steps in their journey

- Confirm what you heard to ensure an accurate understanding of their concerns
- Help alleviate their biggest concern by asking them to expand on what worries them and offering solutions that may help

Proactive Researchers

Patients who are self-advocates and embrace information

- Proactively share what patients can expect and address common concerns to combat misinformation
- Help them set up lab appointments, future office appointments, etc to ensure continuity of care

In Control Optimists

Patients who feel confident about their care plan

- Emphasize what signs or symptoms to watch for so important disease indicators are not overlooked
- Encourage them to continue to be an active participant and stay engaged in their care plan

Social Determinants of Health to Consider

In addition to considering a patient's engagement style, the following factors may shape or impact how best to communicate with each patient[8]:

Demographics: Age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, race, gender identity

Language: Health literacy, limited English proficiency, need for interpreter

Ethnic or Cultural Values: Family structure, religion/spirituality, societal expectations for involvement in care

Family Dynamics: Support system, caregiver involvement

Previous Experiences: Familiarity with cancer, life events

PEER PERSPECTIVES

"Listen first to see how they talk about their cancer. Then join in."

—PhD, MBE, RN, Professor of Nursing at an Academic Hospital in Pennsylvania

Using Empathetic Communication Strategies

Being inclusive and conversational and creating an emotionally safe space for patients will make them feel heard and supported, even when having challenging conversations.[8,10] Patient-centric conversations lead to greater patient satisfaction and reduced emotional distress.[8]

Pause to Improve Communication With Your Patient

11 seconds (median)
How quickly HCPs interrupted their patients after asking about their concerns[11]

6 seconds (median)
The time it took for a patient to explain their concern, if not interrupted[11]

Communication Tips

Consider these advanced practitioner recommendations during your patient discussions[8,10]:

Try to…

- Use the patient's name
- Use exploratory language
- Listen more, talk less
- Keep the language simple
- Ask "Tell me more" or "What does that mean to you?"
- Close the conversation respectfully and outline next steps
- Connect patients to helpful resources
- Build a relationship through small talk (eg, what's your occupation?)

Try not to…

- Say "This is the good cancer"
- Encourage patients to "embrace the 'new you'"
- Use "but"; instead use "and"
- Be too direct; instead balance with compassion
- Promise a specific timeline
- Become their therapist

Sample Conversation Guide When Communicating With Patients About Serious Illness[10]

You may use the following approach when talking with your patients about their goals and values.

	Healthcare Provider	Patient
Set up	"I would like to talk about what's happening with your health and what matters to you. Would this be ok?"	"Yes, that's okay with me."
Assess	"To make sure I share information that's helpful to you, can you tell me your understanding of what's happening with your health now?"	"I've been diagnosed with a blood cancer."
Share	"It can be difficult to predict what will happen. I hope you will feel as well as possible for a long time, and we will work toward that goal. It's also possible that it may get harder to do things because of your illness, and I think it is important that we prepare for that." **Pause: Allow silence. Validate and explore emotions.**	"I'm nervous about the future but want to do what's best for my care."
Explore	"What gives you strength as you think about the future?"	"Watching my grandkids, and hopefully great-grandkids, grow up."
Close	"I will do everything I can to support you through this and to make sure you get the best care possible."	"Thank you. I appreciate your time."

Identifying and Managing Patients' Mental Health Needs

Through open communication, you may identify patients who require mental health support. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) guidelines for managing anxiety and depression in adult cancer patients recommend the following steps for intervention:

! If someone is exhibiting signs of harming themselves or others, call 911 immediately.

Proactively share information[12]

The ASCO guidelines recommend that all patients and patient-identified caregivers be offered information about depression and anxiety.

Assess patient risk for mental illness[12]

- Use screening tools (eg, PHQ-9, GAD-7)
- Clinical considerations:
  - Psychiatric history, including prior mental health treatment response
  - History of substance use or abuse
  - Functional abilities and/or limitations related to self-care, usual activities, and/or mobility
  - Clinical status (eg, recurrent or advanced cancer, comorbidities)
  - Member of socially and/or economically marginalized group (eg, Black race, low socioeconomic status)

Implement mental health interventions based on patient needs[12]

To combat common mental health challenges, the patient may benefit from:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy
- Structured physical activity/exercise
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction

Ensure continuum of care[12]

If a patient requires referral for further evaluation or psychological care, providers should reduce barriers and facilitate patient follow-through.

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PEER PERSPECTIVES

"Improving mental health improves general health and is tied to improved cancer outcomes."[7]

—MD, Chief of Lymphoma at a Major Cancer Institute in Florida

Encourage Patients to Participate in Their Well-Being

Supporting patients as they engage in practices that improve physical and mental health may improve clinical outcomes and help patients feel more in control of their well-being.[13,14]

Wellness Tips for Patients With Blood Cancer

Eating Well

- Improving the health of the gut microbiome may improve treatment response and reduce inflammatory signals[14]
- Increasing fiber intake may improve treatment response and survival outcomes[14]
- Following a Mediterranean diet may decrease risk of depression[15]

Reducing Stress Through Yoga and Meditation

- Inhibits cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and autonomic stress responses[16]
- Improves immune recovery and immune cell activity[17]
- Reduces cortisol, a stress-related hormone[18]

Encouraging Exercise

- Improves quality of life and emotional function[19]
- Reduces fatigue[19]
- Improves immune function and tumor microenvironment[19]

Building a Community

- Establishing social support can help reduce anxiety and depression[20]
- Improves coping, optimistic feelings, physical and mental health, and survival[20]
- Available support may include advocacy groups, nurse navigators, patient support groups, mental or oncology counseling, and psychosocial support, as well as social workers

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