Checklist: Coping with Fear of Recurrence

By Kathy LaTour

Fear of recurrence ranks as one of the most common unmet needs of cancer survivors, according to a systemic review of 130 papers published in the *Journal of Cancer Survivorship* in March 2013. The first step is to recognize when and why you experience these emotions, then learn ways to minimize and cope with that fear.

**Understand your triggers.** The American Cancer Society has listed several common events that may trigger fear and anxiety in survivors, including:

- Follow-up medical appointments
- Anniversary events, such as the date you were diagnosed, had surgery or transplantation, or ended treatment
- Birthdays
- Illness of a family member
- Symptoms similar to the ones you had when you received the initial diagnosis
- A friend or family member receiving a diagnosis or dying of cancer
- Personal reminders, such as a certain food you enjoyed while in cancer treatment or article of clothing you wore to surgery
- News of a celebrity receiving a similar diagnosis

**Find ways to cope.** For some, talking their fears out with others can help reduce anxiety, while others find distractions in their everyday lives more beneficial.

- **Acknowledge your fear, anger or sadness.** Accept that sometimes you may worry about cancer returning and talk about it in a support group, with friends or with a counselor. Talk to friends who will listen and not judge.
- **Live your life.** Pursue activities that distract you. Plan for a trip or other distraction around the time of your check-ups to give yourself something to focus on.
- **Exercise.** Find an exercise you enjoy that will take your mind off fear. Exercise also helps with stress.
o **Pet therapy.** Consider adopting a dog, cat or other animal, and focus on the animal’s needs. Walking a dog daily takes your focus off yourself and increases fitness.

o **Be informed. Learn the actual signs of a recurrence.** Ask your doctor and your healthcare team about potential warning signs of a recurrence and the potential risk, which may be quite low. This knowledge may help ease your concerns.

o **Go in for a check-up.** If you find your fear overwhelming, talk to your doctor about blood work or other tests that will alleviate your fear.

o **Get help with emotional stresses not related to cancer.** The fear of recurrence may be linked with other problems, such as anxiety or depression.

o **Learn techniques to quiet the mind.** Use meditation or wakeful visualization to relax your mind and body. Massage may help.

o **Work toward having a positive attitude.** Self talk in the mirror about the positives in your life.