

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.

- **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.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Get help with emotional stresses not related to cancer.** The fear of recurrence may be linked with other problems, such as anxiety or depression.
- **Learn techniques to quiet the mind.** Use meditation or wakeful visualization to relax your mind and body. Massage may help.
- **Work toward having a positive attitude.** Self talk in the mirror about the positives in your life.