

Guest Speaker Series

Prostate Cancer Support Ottawa



Coping with fear of cancer recurrence or progression



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Méлина is a registered social worker who provides individual counselling to those 18 years of age and older. She also runs a variety of support groups and programs for both children and adults, in partnership with like-minded organizations including CHEO, The Ottawa Cancer Foundation, and the Champlain Palliative Care Hospice Program. Past group work with Bereaved Families of Ottawa, the FRIENDS for life anxiety program for kids and the CLIMB program for children who have a parent living with cancer. She is in private practice in Ottawa at [Coming Home Therapy](#)

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MANAGING FEAR OF CANCER RECURRENCE

PRESENTATION TO PROSTATE CANCER SUPPORT OTTAWA



COMING HOME THERAPY

HOW CANCER IMPACTS MENTAL HEALTH

- Studies estimate the prevalence of depression and anxiety in people treated for cancer to be at least double than that of the general population. (Mental Health Commission of Canada and Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, Mental Health and Cancer Quick Facts, 2019).
- In a recent Canadian report, more than half of patients reported that they were not referred to a care provider to help with their anxieties and fears when diagnosed with cancer. People are receiving care for their physical comfort, but individuals and their families need more information about—and better access to—services to manage symptoms of distress (Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, 2018).
- A large survey of adult cancer survivors in Canada found that 78% experienced at least one emotional concern one to three years after cancer treatment. (Mental Health Commission of Canada and Canadian Partnership Against Cancer, Mental Health and Cancer Quick Facts, 2019).

HOW CANCER IMPACTS MENTAL HEALTH (CONTINUED)

- The waiting period brings a lot of anxiety. You are often waiting for a diagnosis, scan results, treatment, and later waiting to feel like yourself again
- There is often a lot of uncertainty about the disease and the road ahead. Living with uncertainty is a common theme that will continue into treatment and after treatment. People often talk about life before cancer and life after cancer and these are two very different worlds.
- Lack of control, feelings of helplessness and having your health in someone's else hands
- Difficulty to plan for the future and difficulty to ask for and receive help
- Feelings of anger, guilt, shame, sadness, grief, anxiety, worry, hopelessness and survivor's guilt

WHAT THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT FEAR OF CANCER RECURRENCE

- Fear of cancer recurrence is the “**fear, worry** or concern relating to the possibility that **cancer** will come back or progress”
- It is one of the most common psychosocial needs expressed by adults living with cancer
- Fear of cancer recurrence is a normative reaction affecting most people living with cancer to some degree
- It is not better or worse because of the actual likelihood of the cancer coming back (chance of recurrence). You can have a very low chance of recurrence, but still have a very high fear of recurrence.

LIVING WITH FEAR OF RECURRENCE OR CANCER PROGRESSION

- Sadness, grief, anger, numbness, isolation, loss of confidence
- **Hypervigilance** especially prior to procedures, appointments, anniversaries
- Depression, withdrawal from usual activities
- Sense of hopelessness, paralysis
- Insomnia
- Trouble focusing
- Panic and anxiety

LIVING WITH FEAR OF RECURRENCE OR CANCER PROGRESSION (CONTINUED)

- Impact on relationships, work, decisions you make or don't make (difficulty planning for the future)
- Some things to be aware of that can make it worse – negativity bias, a loved one's difficult experience and story that is your frame of reference for what cancer means, someone you love dealing with a recurrence or who has recently died of cancer
- Catalyst for shifting priorities, living in the moment, not sweating the small stuff

WHEN IT GETS REALLY WORRISOME

The problem is when it's always on your mind, impacting your quality of life, debilitating or when you stop planning things in the future, when you stop living and feel stuck

Key features of clinically significant fear of cancer recurrence:

- high levels of preoccupation or worry
- worry that is persistent
- hypervigilance or hypersensitivity to bodily symptoms, where any of these features last for at least 3 months
- functional impairment and maladaptive coping strategies such as excessively seeking reassurance from medical professionals, excessive body checking, or avoiding medical appointments

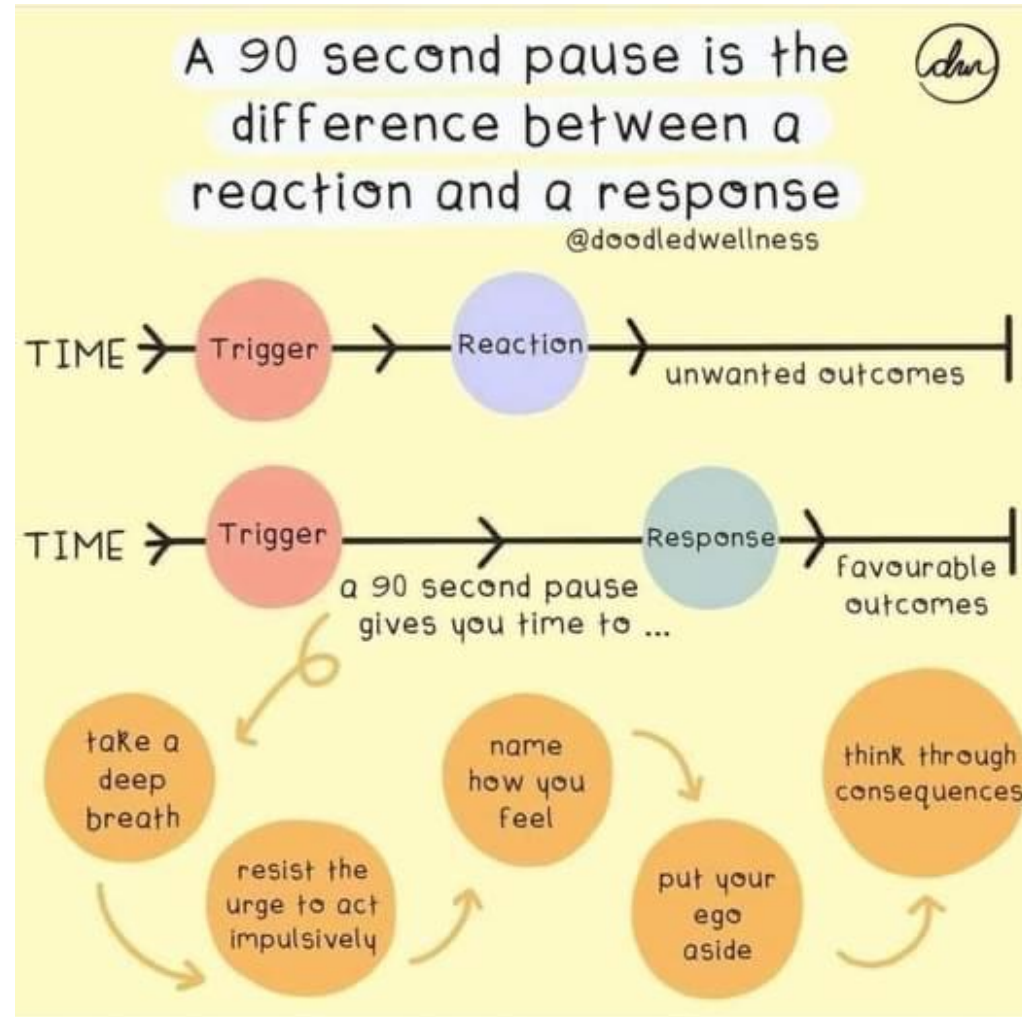
REFLECTIVE EXERCISE AND DISCUSSION

- “Jumping on a train” reflective exercise
- Discussion on what helps

START BY ASSESSING WHERE YOU ARE AND RECOGNIZE WHAT MAKES IT WORSE

- Assess where you are (red light, yellow light, green light)
- Notice thoughts and emotions and how they lead to certain behaviors, actions, avoidance, etc.
- Responding instead of reacting: the 90 second pause
- Notice patterns and anticipate triggers and plan for them

RESPONDING INSTEAD OF REACTING



STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH FEAR OF RECURRENCE AND CANCER PROGRESSION

- Polyvagal theory
- Facing the thoughts and feelings
- Dropping anchor
- Grounding techniques
- Reframing your thoughts through CBT (Identifying thought patterns, Challenging and reframing your thoughts)
- Cognitive defusion strategies through ACT (Create some distance between you and your thoughts by learning unhooking skills and then committing to what matters)
- Mindfulness practice, yoga and meditation (build awareness of what's happening, making conscious choices)

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH FEAR OF RECURRENCE AND CANCER PROGRESSION

- Positive psychology techniques – Gratitude practice, quotes, inspirational stories, acts of kindness
- Identifying your values, who you want to be and how you want to live and focusing on what contributes to that and what pulls you further away from it
- Don't worry alone, peer support, the value in shared experience, finding creative ideas through others
- Manage overall stress, practice good self-care, tune in to what you're feeling (allowing yourself to face it, create worry time, process it)
- Plan for follow up care
- Communication with your medical team

STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH FEAR OF RECURRENCE AND CANCER PROGRESSION

- Express fear – verbally, artistically, through journaling
- Adopting a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Exercise, nutrition, getting information and taking action. Focusing on what you CAN control.
- Finding your source of strength, connecting with your culture, your faith
- Distraction has its place too, in combination with these strategies
- Recognizing when you need more help – psychotherapy, medication

FINDING SERVICES

Psychosocial oncology program at the Ottawa Hospital – 613-737-7700 ext 70516

Prostate Cancer Support Ottawa (<https://pcsottawa.ca/>)

Ottawa Cancer Foundation (<https://www.ottawacancer.ca/>)

Coming Home Therapy (<https://cominghometherapy.ca/>)

Kelly Tabor (<https://kellytabor.com/>)

Jennifer Finestone (<https://jenniferfinestone.com/>)

A CLOSING EXERCISE

What's one thing that you will commit to in order to manage anxiety around cancer recurrence or progression?