

‘Every pain, every twinge felt as though the cancer was back.’ Survey reveals 3 out of 4 cancer survivors suffered deeper anxiety due to coronavirus

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While many of us have experienced greater stress and anxiety as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, a new survey reveals that the impact on those who have experienced cancer has been particularly severe.

Cancer Support UK, which offers coaching and mental health support to those who have been through cancer treatment, undertook a survey of more than 600 cancer survivors.

It's a little known fact that often patients experience the most severe emotional and mental health challenges after treatment - only 20% of those in the most recent survey said they felt their emotional wellbeing improved once their treatment had finished successfully.

This experience was portrayed powerfully in the recent series of Cold Feet with Fay Ripley's character Jenny experiencing emotional struggles following her successful cancer treatment.

But it seems the emotional challenges of those coming to terms with life after cancer have been made particularly difficult as a result of the coronavirus pandemic with 76 per cent of cancer survivors confirming they had experienced an increase in anxiety levels as a result of the lockdown. Many reported feeling isolated and abandoned.

One survey respondent told us: "I felt abandoned. I finished radiotherapy at the end of February, then I wrongly went into shielding. Eventually my doctor told me it was an error due to the speed they had to identify vulnerable patients - this was 10 weeks in. After being swept up in the cancer world I felt quite alone with lots of worries and questions. I didn't like to call anyone for support because of the pressure on hospitals."

Helen, 53, a nurse from The Wirral who was treated for ovarian cancer until October 2019 told us: "I felt so anxious. I couldn't sleep. I felt like I was waiting for the cancer to come back every day. Every pain, every twinge felt as though the cancer was back. (After CO-VID came along) I did worry if it came back... would I be able to be treated? I worked out what I'd do if the worst happened, how would my husband and family cope. How my funeral would be. I began sorting my will out."

Summary of statistics:

Coronavirus

76% of cancer survivors reported greater anxiety as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

46% say they experienced depression as a result of COVID-19 fears.

56% reported an increase in insomnia since the pandemic began.

Life after cancer

42% of cancer survivors say their relationships with family and friends became more challenging after their treatment finished successfully.

48% say their emotional wellbeing was worse after they had been successfully treated for cancer than before, with only 20% saying their emotional wellbeing actually improved after they were told they were in remission.

645 cancer survivors took part in the survey in August 2020.

Case studies:

Helen, 53, from The Wirral

Helen, a nurse, discovered she had ovarian cancer in March 2019 after she experienced abdominal pain on her journey home from work. Following chemotherapy treatment she was told she was in remission in October 2019, but found that she began to feel very low after her treatment stopped.

Helen says: "At that point I felt isolated although I wasn't - there were lots of people coming to see me. I just felt lonely because people didn't understand what I had experienced. I tried to put a smile on my face and to make out that everything was fine, because my family had been through enough stress during my treatment. But really I wasn't OK. I was so anxious."

Helen found valuable support and help with Cancer Support UK's Cancer Coach service. "One day I received a message after putting a post out on Facebook. It was an invitation to a Cancer Support UK telephone support group. At first I was a bit apprehensive. I thought 'how are they going to help me?' But I decided to go for it, and it was really, really good. It was helpful to talk to other people who had also been through cancer and understood that the journey doesn't just stop when the treatment ends."

Sam, 29, from Worcestershire

Sam was diagnosed with stage 2 Hodgkins Lymphoma in February 2019. After six months of chemotherapy, Sam was told she was in remission and her treatment was stopped.

Sam says: "There were times after treatment when I looked in the mirror and I didn't recognise the person looking back at me. It wasn't just because of the changes to my physical appearance which cancer had caused, but in terms of how cancer had changed me mentally and the way that I looked at the world. It has taken me a long time to come to terms with what has happened to me and even now, nearly a year after treatment, I still struggle with certain things, even though it has got much better.

One thing that helped during and especially after treatment was speaking to other people who had been through cancer. Even though everyone experiences cancer differently, there are certain thoughts, feelings and fears that we all go through and through speaking to other people I learned that there is no right way to cope with cancer."

About Cancer Support UK

Cancer Support UK provides mental health and emotional support to people with cancer, during and after the treatment period.

The Cancer Coach telephone support groups are available free of charge to anyone who has completed their physical cancer treatment and is experiencing low mood, anxiety, worry or how to move forward in their recovery.

The course takes participants through a series of weekly facilitated group phone calls, run over a six-week period. The weekly calls take those who have experienced cancer through a series of tips and exercises that aim to give them the tools, support and coping strategies that can help with recovery.

The course is free of charge and confidential, and participants can access the course via the telephone in the comfort and privacy of their own home

For more information about Cancer Support UK and how you can find help or support the charity visit <https://cancersupportuk.org/>

Note to editors

Our case studies Helen and Sam can give interviews and more information and photos are available. Both have also provided video accounts of their stories.

We have more information available from our survey.

Please contact Victoria at victoria@glossmedia.co.uk

The ITV contact to request an image of Fay Ripley in her Cold Feet role is james.hilder@itv.com