

Local Health Commentary

A VIEW FROM THE VILLAGES HEALTH

Although breast cancer is a physical disease, it can be mentally and emotionally devastating. And while we often think of grief in relation to death, chronic illness or disease can be traumatic and life-changing too.

In a study of 166 women, 82.5% had symptoms of PTSD following a breast cancer diagnosis.

The news often seems to come as a shock, even for those with a family history of cancer. There can be a whirlwind of medical tests, decisions, treatments and protocols, which can force us into survival mode.



Brooke Leever

The focus turns toward making it through with as much strength as we can muster, and there may not be space to grapple with grief along the way, leaving us to tend to those feelings later or sometimes try to avoid them completely.

Grief Can Surprise Us

It may come as a surprise to our loved ones and others when such feelings and reactions arise later, after treatments are complete or we are supposedly "finished with it."

Although grief is a universal process, the way we experience it can be unique. Sometimes what we're grieving is the difference between what we wanted or

expected and what we have experienced. No one wants cancer, nor do we fully anticipate the ways it can disrupt our lives and challenge our sense of stability.

With all the uncertainty, it is easy to become overwhelmed, fearful, or hyper-aware, wondering when the next proverbial shoe will drop. Research has revealed traumatic stress can impact our brain and show up in our nervous system.

It may appear as strong reactions, lower tolerance, ruminative thoughts, or avoidance. We may notice it when trying to sleep, a state when it is necessary to let go, relax, and immobilize, but previous experience has trained our nervous system it is not okay to do so. We may have bouts of crying, or struggle to find pleasure in hobbies or meaning in activities we once enjoyed.

Breast cancer may impact our relationships as well, and we may even feel guilty for relying on friends and family for support, especially if we are not accustomed to asking for help or depending on others.

Grief may also appear as anger, irritability, or lashing out. We may grieve our former lives, pre-cancer bodies, or notice a change in our sense of self.



Although being cancer-free can queue the celebrations, healing doesn't always come with confetti. It can take time. It is important for loved ones to understand that a cancer survivor's emotions may ebb and flow. They may no longer need the same type of help they required while in treatment... But support can be vital in other ways... "

Emotional Recovery

Although being cancer-free can queue the celebrations, healing doesn't always come with confetti. It can take time. It is important for loved ones to understand that a cancer survivor's emotions may ebb and flow. They may no longer need the same type of help they required while in treatment, whether rides to appointments, home-cooked meals or neighbors popping by to walk the dog.

But support can be vital in other ways, in the journey to navigate the aftermath and seek emotional recovery. Some days we may want to laugh. On other days we may crave silence. To respond appropriately, loved ones may need to look for clues. Listening is a powerful way to love a breast cancer survivor.

Society can place enormous pressure on us to "get over it" or "move on." If only it were that simple. Grief is rarely a linear process; there is no specific formula or finish line. Even when most of us show up for others with the best of intentions, we may not be

making space for what they are going through. It is a gift to be able to hear, see, or offer emotional safety to others, to listen and allow space for all their feelings without immediately trying to fix or manage them. Grief needs space to be witnessed.

Collaboration and communication are important. The Villages Health offers innovative collaboration of providers working together to meet the physical and mental health needs of our patients. This collaborative model keeps us in sync and able to combine multiple programs, resources, and insights to provide the best individualized treatment for every patient. Breast Cancer Awareness Month reminds us of the importance of early detection. When caught in the earliest stages, survival rates can be 99%. Let us also remember the mental and emotional aspects of healing. Talk with your primary care provider about how behavioral health services may benefit you.

Brooke Leever is a psychologist with The Villages Health.

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