

# Cancer patients become bold advocates once survivors

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Sociologists at Case Western Reserve University found that when passive cancer patients become survivors, they have plenty of bold advice to offer other cancer patients, according to a study in JAGS, the *Journal of American Geriatric Society*.

Eva Kahana, Robson Professor of Sociology and director of the Elderly Care Research Center at Case Western Reserve, reported the findings from interviews with 100 cancer survivors. These survivors are part of a [longitudinal study](#) of 1,107 elderly adults living in a retirement community.

This study calls attention to generally accepting, timid behaviors that elderly patients report about their interactions with the healthcare system while battling cancer. Nevertheless the very same [older adults](#) offer advice to other older [cancer patients](#) to take a more activist stand and become advocates in their care.

This finding of the study overturns the notion that elderly patients are disinterested and disempowered health consumers, Kahana said.

For nearly 20 years, the longitudinal study's research team gathered information from this Florida retirement community to find out what older people do to age successfully and weather chronic illnesses and the frailties in their later years.

In the study's 17th year, cancer survivors were given an in-depth

interview with open- and close-ended questions about their cancer experience. The participants were of an average age of 79, married (62%) and were mostly women (62%). The predominant cancers were breast and prostate.

What surprised the researchers was that survivors became advocates for others, but had not been for themselves. The survivors suggested their peers with cancer get seconds opinions, check the doctor's credentials, keep a positive attitude, join support groups and learn more about treatment options before taking the doctor's advice at face value, Kahana said.

Very few, however, had actually practiced it in the throes of cancer and coped by relying on physicians and family members, according to Kahana.

The study's participants reported in their interviews that during their cancer experience they weren't worried, continued regular routines, had faith in their healthcare providers and followed instructions.

The researchers said the findings suggest "a transition maybe occurring from passive to a more-active or even activist orientation due to the illness experience."

Kahana said that even though the cancer patients didn't practice their own advice, it might "be percolating in their minds."

She thinks that offering the advice and reflecting on the cancer experience can be helpful when these individuals face new chronic illnesses.

**More information:** The findings were reported in the article "Toward Advocacy in Cancer Care for Older Adults: Survivors Have Cautious

Personal Actions But Bold Advice for Others."

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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