

The struggle for personal identity in cancer patient

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We all know shorts and swimsuit season is right around the corner, but what if body image issues went past wiggling thighs and a bulging tummy to a deeper level? What if the body image issues were part of a life-and-death struggle? For people with cancer, the diagnosis not only brings a fight for one's life but may also introduce a battle for personal identity.

“When you look in a mirror, you expect to see a certain reflection, but as a result of the cancer as well as the treatment, the image reflected can be very different. This can be frightening and overwhelming, bringing its own struggles and pain,” said Patricia Mumby, PhD, director of Health Psychology for the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Neurosciences at Loyola University Medical Center and a specialist in psychosocial oncology at the Cardinal Bernardin Cancer Center.

Cancer and cancer treatments often alter a person's body. Some affect a person's appearance while others alter how a person functions. Some changes are temporary, like hair loss, fatigue, and weight gain or loss. Others are more permanent, such as surgical scars or an ostomy, which sometimes is required in the course of colon cancer treatment.

“Patients who feel uncomfortable in their own skin - he or she may have problems feeling whole. They might stop socializing and may have relationship issues,” Mumby said. “Friends and family can help boost their loved one's self-esteem by reminding them it's what's on the inside that counts. It's also important to acknowledge your loved one's feelings.

Listen to them, find out what is affecting them and then work together to find a solution. This is part of the cancer battle and should not be taken lightly.”

The good news, according to Mumby, is that many resources are available to help people regain self-esteem. For instance, if a woman had a mastectomy 20 years ago, there were very limited choices in breast prosthetics. Now a woman can find an almost perfect match to her own size and skin tone. There are also options for hair thinning and loss. And women can regain a sense of confidence about their looks with makeup tips to help with changing skin tones and textures as well as the use of jewelry and accessories.

“For good or for bad, we live in an image-conscious society. Our [body image](#) is a part of our identity and when that is altered it impacts our quality of life,” said Mumby. “We often think of body image as only affecting women, but men face these struggles as well.”

In addition to weight gain or loss, many [cancer patients](#) lose muscle mass, there are changes in hormones and sexual function can be affected.

“For a man, this can raise challenging psychological implications. He may feel less masculine, less vital, less capable and weaker. He may feel he is not able to provide and protect his family - that he is letting people down. Having these kinds of changes can make anyone feel out of control, and no one likes that feeling.”

Places like Loyola’s Coleman Foundation Image Renewal Center, a spa-like retreat where cancer patients can come for resources and respite, are helping men and women take back control.

“When facing cancer it can be overwhelming and some of the side

effects of treatment can be lost in the enormity of information and emotional exhaustion,” said Debbie Morelli, clinical cosmetologist at the center.

How a person’s body is affected by cancer and treatments may vary depending on the individual and the type of cancer. Other common changes include skin tone changes, which can include dark patches, body/face/scalp acne breakouts, mouth sores, drying and cracking skin on the hands and feet, and fingernail and toenail sensitivity.

“Cancer treatments can make nails brittle and skin extremely delicate and sensitive. It’s often too painful for patients to clip their own nails and a loved one doesn’t want to feel they are causing pain. It may sound funny, but we are specially trained in how to do this so we don’t tear skin and limit the pain. It sounds simple, but it makes a big difference for patients and loved ones.”

Morelli also works with the American Cancer Society and other cancer support networks to offer Loyola patients resources to boost self-esteem and find a sense of self while battling cancer.

“A lot of people just enjoy being here because they feel comfortable. We are not dwelling on the medical part of their experience and yet we all have an understanding of what they’re going through. Here, we are our focused on making them feel better about themselves and that’s an important part of healing, too,” Morelli said.

Mumby also encourages [cancer](#) patients to look into exercise options, talk to a nutrition expert and not to be ashamed to reach out for psychological help.

“Sometimes people need to revise their self-image. Change is not bad, it’s just different and it takes time to adjust. What’s important is to find

the positives, focus on a person's strengths and discover what's most important," Mumby said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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