

Cancer patients take comfort in peer stories on online forums

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When faced with potentially life-threatening diseases such as cancer, people often seek information about the disease and support from peers.

The best resources involve personal stories from other [cancer](#) patients that are posted on online forums and scientific websites, which provide comfort during these stressful times, according to a newly published study.

Television entertainment shows and medical dramas, however, can leave people feeling fearful and concerned because the storylines can be suspenseful to hold viewers' attention, the researchers said.

"We tend to worry about whether information found on the internet is reliable, but people look for more than just information. They are comforted and feel supported by the stories and reactions from people who are going through the same ordeal," said study co-author Jan Van den Bulck, professor of communication studies at the University of Michigan.

The study is published online in the *Journal of Cancer Education*. Van den Bulck collaborated on the research with Sara Nelissen and Kathleen Bellens of the University of Leuven in Belgium.

Many studies have focused on [cancer patients](#) using the internet for [peer support](#). The current research investigates how this group uses television and the internet to access peer stories and what the emotional outcomes

are.

Using data from the Leuven Cancer Information Survey, the study looked at 621 individuals diagnosed with cancer living in Belgium. The average age was 54 years old and most were female. In addition to providing personal background, respondents indicated if they viewed television and the internet to follow peer stories and how they felt.

Most respondents preferred to use websites, forums and informative television programs to learn more about the disease.

"The forums can generate interaction between the individuals who are posting real-life stories and those who are reading the stories," said Nelissen, the study's lead author.

Forums also provide more factual and less visual [information](#), which can be more comforting than the dramatic TV shows with emotional visual content, he added.

The study also looked at differences between men and women diagnosed with cancer. Women made significantly more use of all sources for following peer stories.

More information: Sara Nelissen et al. Cancer-Diagnosed Individuals' Use of Television and the Internet as a Source for Peer Stories and Associated Emotional Responses, *Journal of Cancer Education* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s13187-016-1128-9](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13187-016-1128-9)

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