

Dating and Cancer: Deciding When to Get Back Out There and How to Have “the Cancer Talk”

By Jenifer GoodwinMeredith BegleyThursday, February 11, 2016



Rebuilding confidence is key for cancer patients and survivors who plan to jump back into the dating scene.

Summary

Having cancer or a history of the disease can make the search for a relationship seem intimidating. Social worker Barbara Golby gives advice for restoring confidence, setting expectations, and disclosing disease history and shares [resources](#) for cancer patients and survivors looking to jump into the dating scene.

Highlights

- Rebuild confidence by remembering what you have to offer potential partners.
- Sexual health programs can help deal with body insecurities that result from the lasting effects of treatment.
- Practice when and how to reveal your cancer history.

Dating is exciting — but having cancer or having had cancer in the past can make the search for a relationship seem daunting. You may wonder: Am I ready to put myself out there again? When should I talk about my condition? How will my date respond?

“Dating was hard and scary even before you had cancer, and all of those fears are probably still there after the cancer,” says Memorial Sloan Kettering clinical social worker [Barbara Golby](#). “Only now you’re dealing with the fears and insecurities that come up as a result of cancer.”

Those worries may look like a fear of rejection because of your history with the disease, body image hang-ups, and a more general struggle to regain your equilibrium after a frightening and draining experience.

Though many cancer patients have the same questions and concerns, no two relationships are the same. A younger person with goals of marriage and children — and potential mates who may have had little experience with serious illness — probably has different dating concerns than an older person, whose potential partners might very well be dealing with their own health issues. Each person also has his or her own individual comfort level when discussing the disease. Some may find it important to share their experience; others would just as soon never bring up cancer again.

Ms. Golby offers the following advice to help cancer patients and survivors answer some of the questions they may have about dating.

Love Yourself First

A cancer diagnosis can shake people’s self-confidence, making them feel betrayed by their body or as if they don’t have as much control over their future as they once did, Ms. Golby says. This loss of confidence can make it harder to pursue a relationship.

Start to rebuild your confidence by reminding yourself what you have to offer a potential partner and the traits you value most about yourself. Returning to activities you enjoyed before cancer — or trying new ones — can help you feel like yourself again.

[Back to top](#)

Consider What You Want in a Partner

In dating, it’s normal to fret about whether another person is going to be interested in you. But it’s also important to think about the personality traits you value in a partner. You may want exactly what you wanted before cancer, or your priorities may have shifted.

“Dating is not about finding someone who is willing to date you *despite* your cancer,” Ms. Golby says. “It’s about connecting with someone whose company you enjoy and who offers the things you’re looking for in a mate.”

[Back to top](#)

Dip a Toe In

There might not be a magic moment when you suddenly feel the time is right to join an online dating site or accept an invitation to a party where there will be other singles. Remember, going to a social event can be just that — a chance to get out and enjoy yourself, nothing more.

[Back to top](#)

Address Body-Image Issues

Cancer treatment can leave scars, impact mood, decrease desire, and alter sexual function, leaving you feeling insecure and uncomfortable with your body. If you're struggling, MSK offers [sexual health programs](#) with social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, urologists, and gynecologists who can help men and women deal with such challenges.

[Back to top](#)

Plan When You Want to Have “the Talk”

The decision to disclose your disease is highly individual. Some people want to discuss their cancer right away because they feel it's an important factor shaping who they are. Others tend to bring it up almost as a defense mechanism — a test to make sure the other person can handle it so they can avoid being hurt later on, Ms. Golby explains.

“For some people, the right moment is after two or three dates. For others, it's after two or three months,” she says. “People can struggle to find that balance. They don't want to feel they're hiding the cancer, but they don't want cancer to be the first thing someone knows about them.”

[Back to top](#)

Practice What You'll Say

Before the big reveal, do a trial run with a close friend to practice what you're going to say. While you can't control the other person's reaction, you can control how you deliver the message. There are plenty of people who battle cancer and go on to find romance and love.

“Remember that dating is about finding common interests and values, and enjoying one another's company,” Ms. Golby says. “This has not changed just because you had cancer.”

[Back to top](#)

Get Support

Join other patients and survivors at MSK's next online [dating and disclosure support meeting](#) on February 17 at 12:30 p.m. To register, call [646-888-8106](tel:646-888-8106) or email rlac@mskcc.org.

You can also schedule an appointment with our [Female Sexual Medicine and Women's Health Program](#) by calling [646-888-5067](tel:646-888-5067), or with our [Male Sexual and Reproductive Medicine Program](#) at [646-422-4359](tel:646-422-4359).