

Managing the Fear and Anxiety that can Accompany Bladder Cancer

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Stephanie Chisolm:

Thank you so much, Dr. Lolak. There's always a great presentation. As the mom of two golden retrievers, I loved your slide. I know I am guilty of my mind being full, and yet my dogs are walking and they're mindful and they're paying attention and they're sniffing everything. It was just such a nice image to keep in my mind, and I think that really helps. There are a couple questions that have come in, and I had one too. Catastrophic thinking. That's something that as a loved one, as a caregiver can be really hard when maybe a patient, or likewise the patient feeling the same way about a loved one is kind of stuck in this mode of catastrophic thinking. What are your suggestions for bringing that to the forefront so that the couple can address it, the patient and their caregiver can address the catastrophic thinking?

Dr. Sam Lolak:

I think that that's a good question and also a tricky one, because we all do it. We all tend to go to the worst possible outcome, even though we know that the real chance of that may be low, but that's how the brain works. I would say that there are many steps of this, but the first step is in awareness. When you have that awareness that, okay, I'm doing this again, you or your partner pointed out to you in a compassionate fashion, that you're doing this again, and then we reflect on it together. Like I said, mindfulness skill can be really helpful in this because it helps give us space from you and your thoughts, so that eventually you can see that pattern. You can learn from, the last time I thought this was going to happen for sure, then what happened? It didn't happen.

So what about this time? That means that this time there's a possibility that it might not go as bad as I imagined. So you develop those reflections, recognition, and then the practice around it.

Stephanie Chisolm:

I know. I'm one of those people, I play a mean game of worst case scenario. I always can think about the worst and it's sometimes really hard. And you did a really nice job explaining that. So a couple of questions. I feel like even if I beat this disease, I've lost all ability to feel carefree or joyful due to the chronic anxiety that it will eventually come back and progress. Do you have any thoughts on dealing with this specific feeling? You can summarize, you covered so much in your presentation.

Dr. Sam Lolak:

That's another good question, but unfortunately there's no quick answer to it. I think this is very common. What I would say is that if you feel like you need additional support, I would encourage you to seek out maybe first a counselor, a therapist that can help you, first of all give you space to process the experience that you have and then might be able to coach you or help you develop those skills that I mentioned. Right? Because it is something that happens very commonly after you have cancer because of how traumatic it is like I'd mentioned. But at the same time the brain is also capable to change with enough support and practices, whether those support involve counseling practices or even in some cases medication, then I would say explore those options.

Stephanie Chisolm:

Okay, great. All right. I have anxiety about exercising because I fear it will cause a problem or make something worse. I feel like bladder cancer has robbed me of my ability to enjoy exercise. Any suggestions of working through this? You mentioned exercise as almost a therapy for the stress and distress, so how do you get over the fear?

Dr. Sam Lolak:

That's a tough one. So first I would say maybe talk to your doctor first, what kind of exercise that realistically would hurt or would help. They would be in a position to educate you or explain it to you, that okay, this is good, maybe this is something that you avoid, and then you use that information and maybe working with a professional, whether it's a trainer, there's a lot of exercise therapists that specialize in patients with medical problems or physical therapists that may be familiar with cancer patients. And then have them help you to develop that routine. So exercise, right? Because when you know that it's safe, the doctors say it's safe and you have professionals help you, supervise you to do it initially, it might help you gain some confidence.

And then if you still have anxiety about it, then sort of like the previous question about what to do, then you starting to engage in those approaches and techniques, whether it's counseling practices or even medication to help with those symptoms.

Stephanie Chisolm:

Right. And it doesn't have to be exercise like a big program. I know we just recently did a program on exercise and mental health for bladder cancer patients. So Morgan, if you could drop that link to the webinar that dealt with a little microburst of exercise that Scott was mentioning, that might be something very helpful too, to start small and always go to a pro when you're a little anxious about it, they may have techniques, especially if you've had a cystectomy that might help you to protect your abdomen area or your ileal conduit. Anything that makes you nervous, they can find ways to do that. We have one more. Another question. Do you have any experience with the technique of tapping?

Dr. Sam Lolak:

I don't have a ton of experience, but there's a lot of information out there. So for those of you who are not familiar, so tapping is a technique that's derived from a type of therapy called EMDR, which has some evidence to help with PTSD symptoms. So basically the idea is to use tapping as a form to help two sides of your brain integrate the trauma. And again, I'm not an expert, and the tapping that is not technically EMDR can help with some anxiety from the same concept that you help the brain process all the stress so that the brain knows that the difference between what's in the present and what's the memory. And at the same time it can help with relaxation by giving your body a sense of comfort.

So sometime it doesn't have to be a tap, it could be a soothing techniques like when you feel really anxious. Some people would feel better by just, like a self hug or just self soothing, doing this or tap your legs to send a signal back to the brain that everything is okay. I believe there's a lot of resources or books about it and there's some professionals that have a lot of expertise about it. I would refer you to those.

Stephanie Chisolm:

Great. Okay. I think we have time for one last question. For those of us who have undergone a radical cystectomy and are living with a diversion that has changed our body and how it functions, what are some suggestions on how to process or move through that trauma when we have to deal with the new way our body functions every day for the rest of our lives? There's so many anxieties about having a urinary diversion about is it going to hold up? Is it going to work every day? And that stress and anxiety that comes along with it. Do you have any specific suggestions?

Dr. Sam Lolak:

Again, this is a great question, but I'm afraid I don't have a quick answer for it rather than, I cannot imagine going through all this day in and day out, whether it's the real sort of pain and discomfort, plus the sense of body image and sense of self that's outer by all this treatment and the impact that you have, whether in terms of socializing your routines or even your relationships. This is a lot. Okay. I would imagine that when issues like this is really impacting your day-to-day life, you might really benefit from a professional that can help process and give you some specific techniques in all of this. I would recommend probably finding a therapist, someone that you can trust, that you can develop relationship with and then work with them on these specific issues.

Stephanie Chisolm:

Again, I know that people may be joining us from all over the country. If you're in the Northern Virginia area, you can stop by Life with Cancer and see Dr. Lolak and his team. But remember that BCAN does have this one additional resource that we just added. Call 833-ASK-4-BCA, and you can speak to a licensed clinical social worker who will help you identify places in your location to really be able to address some of the anxieties that you might be dealing with. Dr. Lolak, this has been very informative and I think it's been a phenomenal resource for patients. Thank you so much for joining us again today. We really appreciate that you did this program for us at our summit last year, and this is just a wonderful way to remind people that this is an impactful resource. It can really make a difference in the quality of your life.

You're working very hard to improve your health, but sometimes if your quality of life is not great, it can really be an added distress. And I'd like to thank everybody for joining us. Thank you so much, Dr. Lolak. This was great.

Dr. Sam Lolak:

It was my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

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