



Fear of Recurrence



Fear of recurrence, which is the fear that cancer will come back or spread, is incredibly common, affecting practically everyone who goes through a cancer diagnosis. It can begin at diagnosis or after treatment, and anywhere in between. It often comes and goes. At Sharsheret, we speak so often about “scanxiety,” which is that special form of anxiety that pops up around future doctor’s appointments, and routine scans.

It is understandable for you to wish this fear could go away forever. However, this fear is what made you pursue getting the diagnosis. It helped you go through treatment, and it continues to make you attend follow-up appointments. So it’s a more reasonable goal to learn how to walk alongside your fear rather than hope in vain it will disappear. It’s better to try to recognize the moments you’re peering down into the anxiety spiral or have just started going down it, so you can try to climb back out quicker. Recognize that sometimes you won’t be able to; sometimes you have to feel your fear, process your worries and anger. If you can try to get better at recognizing these moments of intrusive thoughts and learn to cope with them, then they won’t take over as often and your mental health will improve.

What can help?

A simple metaphor: Try thinking of your fear of recurrence as a scary monster yelling at you, or a child throwing a tantrum. You might want to throw that monster out the window or just ignore the child to let them tire out. But the monster will return and the child won’t tire because they’re part of you. Instead, can you try to acknowledge them? Tell them “I hear you. I understand what you’re scared of or angry about, but that’s why I have done or am doing X, Y, and Z.” Then, pull up a chair in the corner and sit that monster or child down and give them something to keep busy, like knitting you a scarf or drawing in a coloring book so you can walk away. You still know they’re there, and they might throw another tantrum soon. For now, you can do something else, knowing they’re in the room, knowing they’re not going anywhere, and at least they’re just in your peripheral vision, or maybe even behind your back so you can’t even see them.

Meditation: Many people tell Sharsheret social workers that they're "not good at meditation," or they "can't clear their mind." This is likely because society tells us that meditation is about having an absence of thought. However, you've had thoughts every moment of your life that you can remember, so all of a sudden not having any is an unreasonable goal. Try to think of meditation as an exercise in choosing where to put your focus. If you want six-pack abs, you have to do abdominal exercises daily. So if you want to have an easier time choosing where to put your focus, try to meditate often. When you meditate, remember to be kind to yourself when your mind wanders and just refocus on the task at hand. This is easier when using a guided meditation (online or on an app), but is also possible when simply counting your breath, doing a body scan, or a simple grounding exercise.

- **A Body Scan** is when you start either at the top of your head or the tip of your toes and scan through your body. You can focus on each body part one by one, imagine that you're breathing into each body part, or imagine a warm light traveling through each body part.
- **Grounding Exercises** take many forms. One option is to consider your five senses and name things you can feel, smell, see, taste, and hear. Another is to find a spot on the wall, describe everything you can about that spot: is it in light or shadow, what color is it, is it curved, straight, bumpy, smooth, or angled. Another option is to pick a color and find how many times you can see different shades of that color wherever you are.

All of these options help you interrupt the intrusive thoughts you're having and help you choose to put your focus elsewhere. Often when you can break through the anxiety, you can choose to do something else, like talking with your loved ones, watching that show on Netflix everyone's been telling you to watch, or tackling something on your to-do list that will leave you feeling accomplished. You can also continue to go down the meditative path by doing a mindful activity such as cooking, gardening, or going for a walk. Other options for meditative or mindful activities are adult coloring books, crafting of some kind, going for a walk, or another form of exercising. Even folding the laundry or doing dishes can feel meditative if you choose to let them.

Contact a Sharsheret social worker for more meditation resources.

Journaling is a great way to process the emotions you're feeling. Remind yourself that it's just for you and you don't ever have to go back and read

what you write so you feel comfortable just getting it out and once it's out, it's in the past. You can write what you're thinking or you can find journaling prompts online. You can write with paper and pen, on your computer, or on your phone. You can free-write, or you can imagine writing a letter to someone you love, someone you lost, someone you haven't met yet, or someone you once were or will be.

Peer Support comes in many forms. It can be very helpful to connect with someone else who has been through what you're going through. Conversations with a peer supporter, reading blog posts and articles by those who have been through it, or connecting via online support groups like our Sharsheret Facebook communities are all great options. These connections can help you realize how common your fear of recurrence is, learn from what worked for others to allay their fears, and see that there are many examples of people thriving in survivorship. If this interests you, ask your Sharsheret social worker to connect you with the right peer support option for you.

Therapy is another wonderful option to help you face the fears and feelings you're having so you can process through them. When we don't process our feelings and past trauma, they get swept under the rug and then you spend the rest of your life tripping over that rug. Contact a Sharsheret social worker for a list of free individual and group counseling options from both national and local organizations or ask them for guidance around finding a paid option through your insurance or therapy apps.

Remember to always discuss your medical questions or concerns with your health care team.