



SHARSHERET®

The Jewish Breast & Ovarian Cancer Community

Survivor's Guilt, Trauma, and Life Beyond Webinar
December 4th, 2023
With Katie Salyer, Psy.D.
Clinical Psychologist

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Please click this [link](#) to view the full recording of the webinar.

The following information is provided by Katie Salyer, Psy.D. as follow up to questions received during the program. Please note that she answered all questions to the best of her ability and if you have further questions, you can contact Sharsheret or consult your medical provider.

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Remaining Questions:

How can I make sure my survival inspires others, and not cause them to feel badly (like resentment)?

This question feels 2-part in some ways: 1.) I would clarify that you do not have to “inspire” anyone with your survival. Survivor Guilt can make you feel like you somehow have to deserve or earn your place as a survivor. I encourage you to feel your survival is enough as it is. 2.) As it relates to your concerns for others, I would again give you permission to let go of that perceived responsibility for others’ reactions. Their feelings are their feelings. Resentment or jealousy can even be very normal at times. But those feelings are not yours to solve. I encourage you to maintain basic relational care and concern like checking in on your loved one, asking how they’re doing, encouraging support for them, etc. without the need to “fix” or otherwise resolve your loved one’s feelings.

After my diagnosis and during my chemo treatment, I was psychologically stable; I had high hopes that I would be back to normal. However, now I am on maintenance medication, I feel hopeless and useless even though I am physically much better. How can I gain my self-confidence?

Believe it or not, a lot of survivors report feeling superhuman during the active treatment and “crisis phase” of cancer and then feel like they fall apart when the action slows down. This roller coaster is actually very normal. Our brains and bodies are designed to protect us and keep us moving through situations of high stress like a cancer diagnosis. The adrenaline dump when the crisis is over can feel like a major crash - emotionally, spiritually, in terms of identity, and more. The transition into survivorship or maintenance can be a great time to get extra support or find community with other like-minded survivors. Many others are likely experiencing the same crash and burn, and survivors even farther down the road can assure you it does get better. For more self-confidence, I would begin with self-compassion and then start making small but manageable steps in the direction you want to go. It is a marathon, not a sprint. And you’ve been through a lot! So give yourself permission to heal, one step at a time.

I have a close friend who has a chronic serious illness (MS), and I often think, my issue is finished and hers is chronic. How do I handle those feelings?

Many diagnoses, even cancer, can become “chronic” illnesses that require lifelong treatment. Your feelings are very much at the heart of Survivor Guilt, challenging your sense of “worthiness” as compared to someone with a more advanced or complex disease. I encourage you to sit with this webinar and its recommendations to see your Survivor Guilt differently. It is a normal reaction and a reflection of your values. At its heart, it is showing you your love for this person and the belief you have that they deserve health as much as you do. There can be a lot of grief when seeing their pain. If reframing these feelings does not altogether do the trick, consider some of the “Homegrown Therapies” or even “Professional Therapies” identified toward the end of the presentation. You may be able to loosen the grip of Survivor Guilt if you release it with expressive arts, transform it into advocacy, or explore other meaning-making or spiritual answers.

Recently one of the survivors who got diagnosed after me, just seems like will lose her battle. I know everyone has their own journey but I feel her pain on a deep level, maybe its survival guilt or fear of unknown. Your session is coming right on time. I need validation of this.

As a survivor watching a loved one decline, it is a tough cross section of painful empathy and personalized fear. It is normal to see yourself and your own fears in their journey, and yet there is a strong wish to be available and supportive in their time of greatest need. All of these feelings also crash into a bittersweet mess of gratitude and grief, thankful you are healthy while excruciatingly sad that your friend is not. It is a lot to hold all these mixed feelings! I wish you both peace and comfort.

How do I handle my guilt about not joining family gatherings when I am not up to it due to treatment/recovery from surgery. I have teenage children who would benefit from their aunt's/cousin's support (like Chanukah parties) by attending family gatherings and I am not necessarily up to joining. We live far from our family and need to travel to join them so I can't send the kids on their own. Any perspective on what my 'responsibility' for others emotional needs during my recovery would be helpful.

Oh boy, I'd love a whole other webinar to tackle this one! It is tough to parent while dealing with cancer! The best nutshell I can offer is: Kids NEED their parent to be emotionally stable, and sometimes in order to maintain that stability, a parent's need comes before the kids. A regulated mom means the kids have the best chance of being regulated too. In this example, a regulated mom can be explicit about the difficult choice to stay home, using the opportunity to talk about grief, loss, and the sadness she may feel in missing the holiday this year. She can be regulated enough to weather disappointments and coach her kids through their big feelings too. But a

dysregulated, overextended mom who makes the travel out of obligation or guilt risks communicating a whole lot of other unspoken confusing messages. Maybe: Mom is not ok but she can't admit it, so maybe I can't trust her word. Even worse, mom is not ok and this is too big for her to talk about, so I should be scared. Going on the trip may model poor self care and boundaries or instill guilt in your older kids who can sense you don't want to go. So as hard as it may be, this holiday season may be more of a life lesson about how to handle hard times, how to prioritize, and how important it is NOT to rush the healing process. The hope is, short term loss for more happy healthy holidays in the long term.

I feel that because I've received a positive outcome (miniscule chance of reoccurring, no chemo, no medicine, just surgery) I have a moral & personal obligation to find a purpose. I have no idea what that is yet. I'm working on it but what advice or your thoughts on this situation? Thank you. I have deep compassion for your comment. Thank you for sharing. You express what so many struggle with in Survivor Guilt, that compelling need to pay back or otherwise earn the precious health you have had restored. If making meaning out of your cancer journey helps you to alleviate your Survivor Guilt, then I encourage you to continue exploring your values, strengths, passions, and potential interest in finding a purpose or leaving your mark. If this expectation causes you more suffering, I encourage you to sit with this webinar and its messages. Your survival is enough. The guilt you feel is a measure of your grief and a testament to your values of love and fairness. See if you can coexist with this guilt or express it in smaller ways without the weight of the world. Whatever course you take, I wish you peace of mind and heart.

As a 10yr survivor who wasn't recommended chemo or radiation, so I've always struggled with calling myself a survivor because I'm not "that kind of survivor," I struggle even more now being so distant from that time. I feel like it makes me more nervous so I steer clear of the feelings I had and I'm actually late for my annual scans I think as a result. How can I process these feelings so I don't give into avoidance?

The feelings expressed in this story tug at my heartstrings and lead me to wonder whether this individual might benefit from more support to process her feelings. Cancer is cancer. And cancer can be traumatic at any stage. Trauma and guilt can get in the way of what is needed to stay healthy. Avoidance feeds anxiety. So the more you avoid, the more anxious you get, and the more likely you are to continue avoiding, and the cycle grows on itself making your world smaller and smaller as you avoid and cut out more and more. Sometimes it takes a plunge into courage to log into that patient portal and schedule a screening. This may be a case of "ripping the bandaid off" and not thinking too deeply on it. That said, if your feelings are big enough that you have to avoid thinking about it too, then it may be time to get additional support from a professional experienced in health anxiety or medical trauma.

I'm NED since November 2022. A friend was recently diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer. How can I best help her?

You don't need me for this question! I encourage you to use the wisdom you have within. What did you need when you first heard the news of your diagnosis? What words or actions communicated that you were validated, loved, and not alone? You don't have to have all the answers to be a good friend. Sometimes, sitting with your loved one in the Yuck without running away is the simplest, hardest, and most loving thing you can do. That said, I continue to ground you in your own needs as well. Are you feeling regulated enough to sit in the Yuck? Don't try to save someone drowning if you aren't yet able to swim. But if you have it in you, let them take the lead, grieve, and tell you what they need, moment to moment. The adjustment to a Stage 4 diagnosis is complicated and a moving target. Just make sure you take care of yourself along the way. Survivor Guilt does not fix this sad news. It does not restore your friend's health. It does not right a wrong or fix a problem. So

take care of yourself in these moments of guilt and grief. Give yourself permission to feel it and let it move through before making way to be “the helpful friend.”

