Patient Handout: College & Cancer 101

Dear Student,

You are a college student… with cancer. That makes no sense. It’s so unfair. We agree! But the fact is that cancer can happen to anyone. Whatever you are feeling right now, remember two things: (1) This is not your fault, and (2) You can take steps to help achieve the best outcomes—both academically and with your health. Here are insights and tips from college students who have triumphed over college and cancer.

What is the biggest mistake some students make?
A major regret we hear from students is wishing they’d disclosed their diagnosis to people who could have helped—or helped earlier. They’d mistakenly believed nobody could understand or that people would pity them. Avoid that regret by talking with people who can provide guidance and support: faculty mentors, friends, and family. [Note: If some people disappoint or upset you by responding horribly, that’s on them. Their bad, not yours.]

What do you need to do right away?
Get expert medical attention NOW, even if you have major exams or events coming up. Your diagnosis changed the priorities, putting your cancer situation on top and some others on hold for now. Find out from your oncologist (cancer doctor) or your primary care doctor: • What are your immediate medical needs, if any? • How quickly do you need to begin cancer treatment? • Do you need to do anything now to preserve your future fertility? • Is it safe to travel and take time getting second opinions or considering clinical trials?

What about classes?
Even if you plan to continue school uninterrupted, you are wise to optimize options by taking these steps immediately: • Notify the Dean of Students, who can then notify faculty. Or you then notify faculty yourself. • Contact the Office of Accommodations (other names: Office of Accessibility or Office of Disability). • Contact the office of financial affairs to learn about options for part-time study, medical leave, tuition reimbursement, and maintaining or obtaining scholarships. • Find out about your rights. The hard truth is that you cannot possibly know your options for your studies until you know your treatment plan. By getting the ball rolling now, you will decrease your stress when it’s time to decide on cancer treatment. You’ll be better prepared to make the best decisions for you—medically and academically.

What if you feel overwhelmed?
A cancer diagnosis can paralyze even the strongest person. Regain your footing by reaching out to the Office of the Dean of Students or the Office of Accommodations. Be direct and forceful: “I need to see someone right away.” Worries about expenses or about looking “sick” are real. The sooner you get expert advice, the sooner you can take steps that help you feel grounded again.

What if people push you to get counseling?
If you feel like you’re handling things fine, consider this: College is stressful, and cancer is stressful. Counseling offers you a crash course in developing your coping skills and a safe place to unload emotions. That combo helps students optimize their ability to deal with challenges, just as all athletes benefit from coaching. When facing college and cancer, seeking help is a sign of strength.

What if people criticize you for seeming too calm?
Yikes! People can say the most unhelpful things. If you are taking proper action (see bullets in 2nd and 3rd answers, above), let it go. Or educate well-meaning people about respecting and not sabotaging your confidence and hope.

What if you are unsure whether or how to tell your friends?
You control whom you tell and how. Understandably, you might want to keep the diagnosis secret. The many upsides of sharing the diagnosis with friends (at least, close friends) include that you: • Benefit from support from those who want to help. • Avoid the burden of undeserved shame that often arises while keeping secrets. • Prevent miscommunications. Friends sense something going on and may draw wrong conclusions that hurt everyone.

Figuring out whom to tell and how can be complicated and stressful. This go-to site provides links to practical advice to this and other common dilemmas: tinyurl.com/AYAresource.

What about your parents or other adults who raised you?
Fact: This illness is happening to you. Even so, keep in mind that your cancer diagnosis can affect your loved ones in monumental ways. They care about you and want to know what’s happening. They’re probably upset and just want to help.

There is no “right” or “wrong” amount of parental involvement. There is a best amount for you. If you are over 18 years old, you control who gains information about your illness and academics. Faculty and the college staff generally require releases from you to talk with anyone else. Whatever your home situation, you help yourself and your family by acknowledging, “I know this is affecting you” and telling them directly how you want—or don’t want—their involvement.

What if you have younger siblings at home?
Research shows that siblings, even very young ones, know “something big” is up. They often need more attention from the adults in their life. That’s not your job. If you feel up to it, you can help by: • Making a quick call, texting, or facetime so your sibs see that you are still you. • Asking your parents how they are helping the other kids through the family illness.

What now?
Assemble your team of supporters to assist with whatever you might need, such as help going to appointments, learning about your treatment options, and completing scholarship applications for students with cancer. Find people who can provide emotional support without shutting down your painful emotions like fear, anger, or sadness. Remember: cancer is an illness (not a death sentence). Cultivate hope every day of being one of the many college students who survived cancer treatments, grew through adversity, and graduated to a full and happy life. D7