Patient Handout: Counseling With an Oncology Social Worker

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ocial workers can make a world of difference in the life of a patient. (See “Social Workers on the Oncology Team”; Oct. 25, 2016.) If you see a patient in need, this handout can supplement your recommendations to consult a social worker. My hope is you share it with all your patients. Many who appear fine may do better in some way(s) after using one or more services offered by social workers. Feel free to edit or share it as is.

Oncology Social Workers

Dear Patient,

We want you to get the best care and live as fully as possible. That’s why we want you to know about oncology social workers. They are experts in the non-medical aspects of cancer, from diagnosis and treatment to recovery and long-term survivorship.

Many patients tell us that social workers made a huge positive difference for them. How? Patients describe benefiting from invaluable insights, information, advice and support in one-on-one counseling, and/or through referrals to other support services.

How might an oncology social worker be of assistance to you?

Oncology social workers are trained to help you with the challenges of illness—medical, practical, emotional, and spiritual. Whatever your medical situation, they can provide insights, tools, and practical assistance with the following:

- Calming fears and anxieties
- Dealing with tests and treatments
- Communicating with your healthcare team
- Managing stress at work and home
- Rearing children while undergoing treatment
- Adjusting to changes, losses, and uncertainty

Do people who seem to be coping well visit social workers?

Yes, all the time. Even if you are doing well, we think it’s marvelous—and healing—to do everything possible to make your journey safer, easier, or less frightening in some way.

What if your family and friends provide great support?

You are fortunate. Your loved ones may be all you need, especially if one of them has experience with cancer. That said, social workers can provide something your loved ones cannot: A professional relationship in which you can let down your guard completely. Social workers are experts who understand and sympathize without feeling emotional themselves. Unlike family and friends, they will leave your world once you stop counseling. What happens in counseling stays in counseling.

How many visits with a social worker does it usually take?

It depends. If addressing a straightforward issue or looking for specific information or referrals, you may satisfy all your needs in one or two visits. Or you may do best with a series of visits. Some patients pursue counseling in an ongoing fashion through treatment and recovery. There’s no right or wrong number of sessions. Rest assured, you can stop and restart counseling at any time.

What are the downsides of counseling with a social worker?

Counseling may:

- Take time
- Cost money
- Be hard work

Sadly, even in this modern age, some people see counseling as a sign of weakness. We don’t. We think of oncology social workers the way elite athletes think of trainers, helping you do your best through the challenges. If you do your best, you’ll never look back with regret, saying, “I wish I’d known then what I know now.”

Please tell us if family or friends are making it difficult for you to pursue counseling. We want you to have every advantage, including the guidance and support of a social worker, if needed.

What if you don’t have time or energy for anything extra?

Your time and energy are stretched by the demands of your illness. Since counseling is almost always elective, many patients see counseling as an “extra”—something they can put off until a less stressful time.

Here’s a better way to think of it: While a counseling session may drain your energy that day, delaying counseling may drain your energy every day if you:

- Continue to deal with fixable problems
- Develop preventable problems
- Keep unpleasant emotions bottled up

Just because you can get through without the assistance of a social worker doesn’t mean you should.

What are the upsides of seeing a social worker?

The overriding benefits include helping you…

- Make difficult medical decisions in keeping with your values
- Adjust to losses and unwanted changes as quickly as possible
- Grieve losses, while protecting your loved ones from the brunt of your sadness

In addition to providing one-on-one counseling, social workers can link you to a variety of support groups, as well as to local services that may be able to help you with transportation, financial concerns, and supporting your children through the changes at home.

What if you had an unpleasant counseling experience in the past?

You and your circumstances are different today than they were in the past. And you won’t be working with the same counselor.

If you pursue counseling with a social worker, ideally your personalities and styles will “click” at the first meeting. As with any new relationship, sometimes the chemistry isn’t great. If that happens, we are happy to refer you to a different social worker. Or, before switching, you can try one more visit to see if the relationship might work well for you after all.

What now?

- Keep us updated about how things are going at home and at work/school.
- Keep in mind that social workers are available to share their experience and expertise.
- Contact us if you have any difficulties connecting with a social worker or getting an appointment.

Cancer is a challenging disease. Support services may help you get good care and live as fully as possible today, tomorrow, and every day.