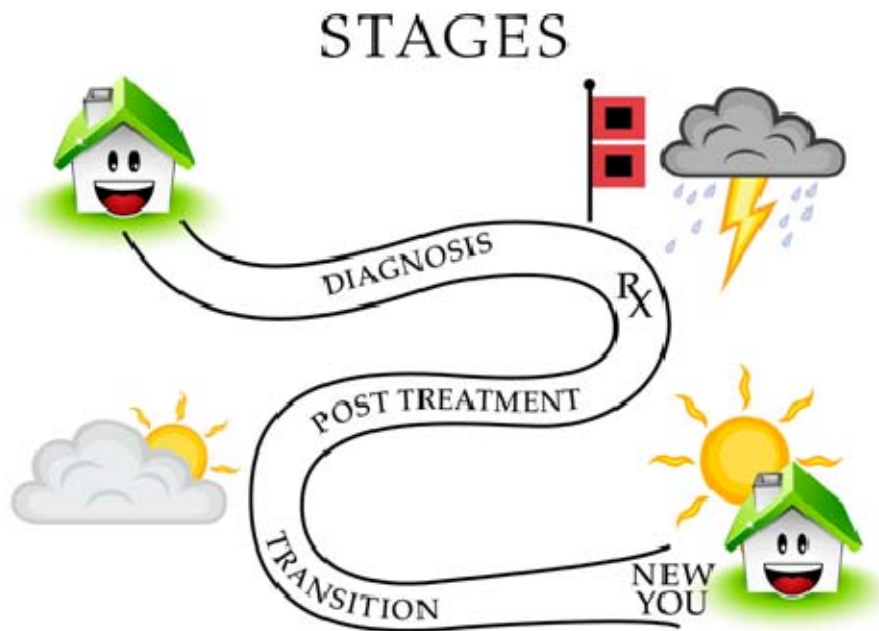


Common Emotional Stages of Cancer

By Paula Holland De Long ACC, CPCC

Finding out I had cancer changed me irrevocably, forcing me into uncharted waters. I remember thinking I was the only one who felt like this, and being so afraid that it would never end. I never imagined that what I was feeling was natural or normal. It felt so abnormal compared to the way I used to be.

Sometimes I compare the cancer experience to going through a hurricane.



You're living your life in your house, just like always, and then you get the first storm warnings: a hint that something might be wrong. It might be a consistent pain, a lump, or a test result that raises concern. You are concerned, but know the odds are that the storm won't hit you. In the same way you'd buy extra water and make sure your generator was working, you get it checked out. In the same way you believe that an oncoming hurricane will drift harmlessly out to sea, you hold the belief that cancer will not happen to you.

But the odds defy you. The hurricane hits with all of its fury. You have cancer. Shock and disbelief so unexpected that it's impossible to comprehend. Your world has changed and there is nothing you can do. Your priority is getting through it.

After a hurricane blows through, there's a whole period of rebuilding and getting used to the changes. When your cancer treatment ends, you don't just magically go back to normal, either. Often you are physically changed, emotionally drained, and reeling from the chaotic period you've just endured. The safety net of routine doctors' visits and treatments ends, and your world changes again. You may find that the life you left behind is waiting for you, but you want

more. After facing death, your time becomes more precious and valuable. As your world shifts once again, you wonder, “How do I rebuild my life? What can I improve on? Can I recreate the things I loved? Can I love my new life even more than the old one?” As you gain perspective and clarity, you begin to make decisions, take out your toolbox, and begin again.

Whether you’re renovating your house or rebuilding your life, reconstruction can be challenging. Have you ever had a construction project that didn’t have surprises and delays? But time passes, and eventually the noise and dust has settled. It’s like that after cancer treatment, too—there will come a time when you’ll reach a level of acceptance and comfort with who you have become.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH STAGE:

Time of Diagnosis and Treatment: Normal and natural emotional rollercoaster. Chaotic emotions including shock, disbelief, fear, sadness, depression, guilt, numbness, gratefulness, hope, and everything in between, sometimes all in the same day. Treatment routine and medical activities reduce chaos. Seek help for ongoing feelings of depression, guilt, or hopelessness.

Treatment Ends, Starting to Rebuild: Chaotic emotions resurface while rebuilding life. Loss of medical support team creates feeling of anxiety and uncertainty. Feelings of guilt, grief and loss and mixed with hope, enthusiasm, gratefulness and joy. Physical, financial, practical and emotional impact of experience begins to assimilate.

Transition /Exploration: Adrenaline of battling the disease subsides; time is more precious; urgency and commitment to having purpose and satisfaction grows. Urge to let go of things that are now trivial and replace them with value-driven choices. Learning new ways of thinking and being. Life focus transitions from cancer to other areas.

The New Normal Life: Life focus and routine is not primarily focused on cancer. Survivor focuses on self-exploration, normal living and is reconciled with changes of the cancer experience.

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Cancer survivor, professional life coach, award-winning author, and inspirational speaker Paula Holland De Long is an authority on how the lessons of survivorship can bring joy, passion and purpose to anyone's life. Her personal battle with cancer inspired her to found **What's Next For My Life, Inc.**, whose award winning self-guided cancer journals, workshops, and support products are offered at cancer treatment centers, support organizations and directly to patients and survivors. To learn more call 954-565-6894, email paula@WhatsNextForMyLife.com or visit WhatsNextForMyLife.com.