



On Cancer: Virtual Groups Provide Patients with Online Cancer Support and Education

By [Julie Grisham, MS, Science Writer/Editor](#) | Friday, April 12, 2013

Sharing concerns with a support group can be a beneficial way for people with cancer as well as their caregivers to cope with physical and emotional concerns that arise during and after diagnosis and treatment. But attending meetings can be difficult, especially for those who are dealing with a serious illness, live far from Memorial Sloan-Kettering, or are busy juggling the demands of work and family life.

This was the motivation behind the creation of Memorial Sloan-Kettering's [Virtual Groups Program](#). Launched in 2010, the program now offers a number of real-time, moderated, online support and education groups for people with cancer and their families. The programs are confidential and cost free. Several are also now available to people being treated outside Memorial Sloan-Kettering.

Bringing People Together

"It's amazing to be able to bring people together, regardless of geographic location, to benefit from each other's experiences and the expertise of professional staff," says Rachel M. Schneider, Program Manager of the Virtual Groups Program. Ms. Schneider, who is also the creator of Virtual Groups, was working as a social worker when she realized that many people who would like to participate in support groups and educational programs were not able to, especially because of the difficulties they had getting to Memorial Sloan-Kettering's Upper East Side campus.

"When we started the program three years ago, people thought it was ahead of its time," she explains. "No one else was doing live, moderated, interactive programs, which serve a very different function from things like message boards and chat rooms."

To join a Virtual Group, participants log in to a secure webpage, which allows moderators and presenters to share written information and images. They then enter their telephone number and the system calls them back directly, so that they are able to speak with each other and the moderator over the phone.

All of the groups are moderated by Memorial Sloan-Kettering professionals, including social workers, nurses, genetic counselors, and physicians. Moderators may present educational information and help lead discussions. The groups generally last between an hour and 90 minutes, and they are offered at various times throughout the day.

Platform for Patient Education

In addition to hosting regular support groups for caregivers and for patients with cancers such as [esophageal](#), [testicular](#), and [pancreatic cancers](#), as well as [sarcoma](#), the Virtual Groups platform is also used to host educational sessions. Regular topics include:

- male and female [sexual health](#)
- [clinical genetics](#)
- preparing for a [stem cell transplant](#)
- preparing for surgery for various types of cancer

Focus on Confidentiality

Patient confidentiality and privacy are important components of the program. At the start of each session, participants are reminded that they should be in a private area and keep anything they hear from other participants confidential. They are also encouraged to use only their first names and last initial when identifying themselves.

"Most people really appreciate that these groups are anonymous, and they say that they are able to share things that they might not otherwise share," Ms. Schneider says.



The potential impact of connecting with people who are in the same boat is phenomenal.



-Rachel M. Schneider, creator and manager of the Virtual Groups Program

“Overall, people say these groups help meet a need that hasn’t been met in other ways,” she concludes. “Those who participate describe a reduction in social isolation. The potential impact of connecting with people who are in the same boat is phenomenal.”

Find more information about [upcoming Virtual Groups](#).

For another form of support, our [Connections online community](#) is also available to Memorial Sloan-Kettering patients, caregivers, survivors, and friends.

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