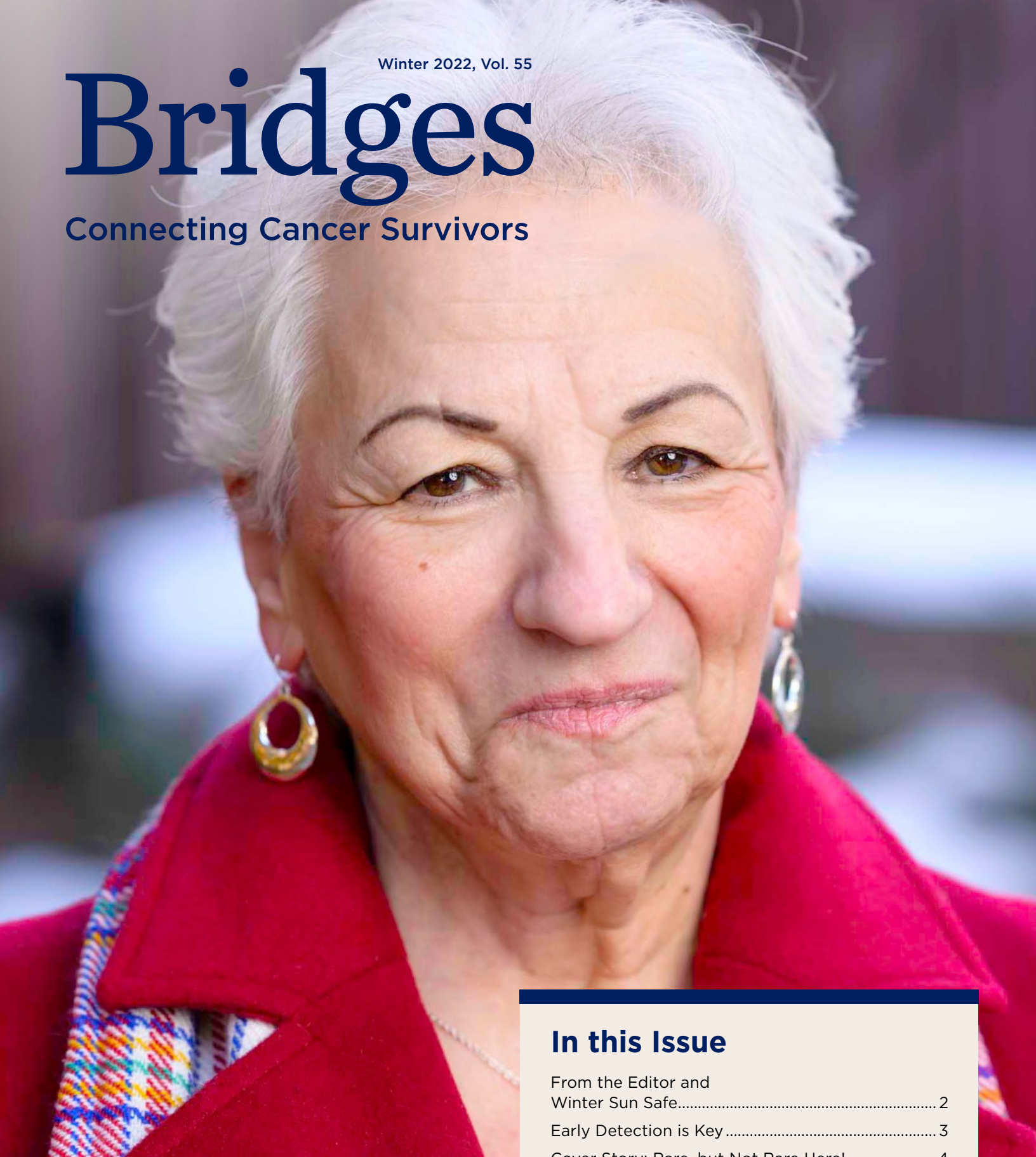


Winter 2022, Vol. 55

Bridges

Connecting Cancer Survivors



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Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

From the Editor

By Eileen F. Gould



No matter your personal or religious beliefs, the holidays and end of the year are often a time of reflection.

Cancer care doesn't stop during a pandemic or during the holidays: It's a 24/7 World of Cancer.

This is the second holiday season during the long and arduous ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic

— something that is hard for most of us to fathom.

Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center has remained fully functional during these difficult times, and there are so many people to extend gratitude toward at this institution.

Patients, staff, and volunteers are all in the journey of cancer survivorship together. Zoom and telemedicine have allowed for new ways to stay connected with medical teams or family and friends, and resources have expanded accessibility to the convenience of home. In a challenging time, we are thankful for the ways we have been able to connect and to continue reaching all of you in the *Bridges* community.

We here at *Bridges* wish everyone a safe and pleasant holiday season and a brighter and healthy New Year for 2022.

If you would like to share your story or receive an email copy of *Bridges*, please visit www.mskcc.org/bridges. *Bridges* is now printed on recycled paper and, as always, is available online.

Winter Sun Safe

By Parisa Momtaz, MD

Although winter months can be brutally cold, the sun continues to burn bright, and along with that comes constant exposure from UV rays.

The (UV) light of day during fall/winter can be just as taxing on the skin as summer days, and it is important to continue sun protection during the colder season, whether on an ordinary day running errands outdoors or if engaged in outdoor winter activities or sports.

Even though the sunshine is not as hot or even visible in the colder months or on overcast days, the clouds are no obstacle — UV rays can

still penetrate through them. UVB rays mostly contribute to sunburns and can be reflective on surfaces like snow or ice. UVA rays can also penetrate through glass, so driving or even being indoors does not confer protection.

Winter sun-safety measures include sun protective clothing like long sleeves and pants. Hats will protect the scalp, and sunglasses will protect the eyes. Continue to wear sunscreen (SPF 15 or higher) on the face, neck, and hands, and don't forget the ears. Some daily facial moisturizers may already contain sunscreen.

Just because the heat of the summer may be gone, it doesn't mean the sun isn't burning just as bright in the colder seasons. Your skin is vulnerable year-round. Please remember to practice sun protection during all four seasons!



Parisa Momtaz is a medical oncologist with dermatology training. She treats patients with advanced melanoma at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center's Westchester location. She has also helped establish a melanoma survivorship clinic at the MSK Westchester location.

Early Detection Is Key

By Helen Sanudo

With a shopping cart full of Christmas purchases, my cell phone rang. I picked up the call and became very nervous when I heard it was my gynecologist. He revealed that cancer cells were discovered on a recent procedure I'd had done. My doctor advised me to call an oncologist as soon as possible.

What do I do with all these presents in my cart? Do I leave or do I purchase them? Not knowing what procedures I may need before Christmas, I decided to pay for them. Luckily, I had forgotten my eyeglasses that day and was only wearing sunglasses. They masked my tears as I checked out at the register. From my car, I called my husband to relay the bad news. Once home, he consoled me as we thought of how to tell our 12-year-old son the news when he came home from school. Since I lost my brother-in-law to cancer a few months earlier, we knew our son was well aware of the seriousness of a carcinoma diagnosis.

My husband researched the prognosis of uterine cancer on the Internet. When he found out that it had a 95% cure rate, we felt a sense of relief. It made telling our son a whole lot easier that everything should be alright. After my hysterectomy, I did not need further treatment because the cancer was caught at stage I. I went back to life as usual — busy with PTA responsibilities, taking care of my home, and going on vacations where I could enjoy my favorite hobby, photography.

When our son was in high school, I decided to become a volunteer for melanoma awareness. Years later, I was diagnosed with melanoma under the toenail, a very rare form of this cancer. While I had sun-damaged skin



Helen Sanudo retired from 25 years of federal service to adopt her son and become a stay-at-home mom. One of her many positions in the PTA allowed Helen to use her favorite hobby, photography, by taking pictures of school events and submitting them with articles to a local newspaper. She lives in New Hyde Park, New York, with her son and husband, who is also retired. Besides her current volunteer work for melanoma awareness, Helen enjoys baking, gardening, and scrap booking.

on my arms and legs for decades, those areas remained benign. Now, I had a malignancy under the nail. This was a devastating blow to me and my family. We all knew how deadly melanoma was.

Before knowing what my prognosis might be, I prayed that I would at least be able to see my son

graduate from college in a year. With the amputation of the top part of my toe, I was left cancer free with no need for additional therapy. How lucky can one be to have survived two cancers? I feel my action to seek treatment as soon as I noticed something different with my body was the secret to being able to survive both cancers. Early detection is key!

One in five people will be diagnosed with some form of skin cancer in their lifetime. Melanoma, while less common than some other skin cancers, is more dangerous because it advances and spreads quickly if not treated early. This form of cancer can originate anywhere on the body including the palms of hands, soles of the feet, and under the nails of both. My volunteer work with melanoma awareness helped me seek the proper treatment at an early stage. Otherwise, I would not have known that dark streak under my nail was actually cancer.

Did you realize you should wear sunscreen all year long on the exposed parts of your body? Water and sand at the beach reflect the sun's rays — snow does the same in the winter. Do you remember to guard your ears, scalp, and the tops of your hands from the sun?

Being free from uterine cancer for eleven years and melanoma for two, I am grateful for every day that I have. Oh, by the way, my prayer was answered. I saw my son graduate from college on Mother's Day. What a wonderful gift!

Rare, but Not Rare Here!

By Diane Halkowicz

Diane Halkowicz is busy these days — enjoying exercising and planning to start quilting again. She says, “I quilt by machine and by hand. Hand-quilting takes longer, but it’s much more rewarding.” Diane lives in beautiful central Pennsylvania with her husband of 54 years; they are high school sweethearts.



A cancer diagnosis is scary. I couldn’t hide my feelings of fear; I was weighing life and death alternatives, until a radiologist admitted not knowing enough about my cancer. He suggested I make an appointment at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. He was my saving grace: His suggestion prompted my decision to “choose life.”

A lump on the back of my tongue was surprisingly discovered when I went for a colonoscopy; the anesthesiologist looked in my mouth pre-procedure and saw a large tumor.

I had two surgeries within months: the first (not at MSK) was to biopsy the tissue/lump, which was verified malignant: hyalinizing clear cell carcinoma of the back of the tongue. We were told this was a rare cancer.

At MSK, my husband asked the doctor if my cancer was, indeed, rare and was told, “It is a rare cancer, but it’s not rare here.”

So, at MSK, I had a mandibulotomy. This required cutting through my mandible (lower jaw) so my face could be opened up. The portion of the back of my tongue (where the residual tumor resided) was amputated to ensure that the tumor was entirely

removed. The floor of my mouth was lifted to expose glands and nerves related to the surgery. My neck was incised to access lymph nodes that were possibly affected. Finally, I had plates screwed into my chin to hold my face together. I woke up with a drain in my neck, lots of stitches, and a tracheotomy. I could not eat or speak for days. My surgery left me with some invisible limitations. In a short time, my scars became barely noticeable, an outstanding credit to the surgical team. The alterations inside my mouth make eating and speaking difficult, but these changes are not obvious. My brain had to adjust to the new mechanics, but we manage: my tongue, my brain, and me.

Before my surgery, I was happily babysitting our grandson on weekdays while his parents worked, from the time he was six weeks old to 26 months old. I was enjoying quilting, baking, and our orange Maine Coon cat. I was 72 at the time.

My husband and I now share the rewards of a 54-year-long marriage and four loving children with their own families. They are our family support. We have been lifted up with many prayers. I have the security of care from a dedicated surgeon and psychologist

who are never too busy to answer questions, find solutions, and walk me through my concerns. I could not have made it through without help from all of them, most of all, from God.

Now I explore ways to stay healthy, eating nutritiously and exercising almost daily. MSK’s Integrative Medicine Service has been a blessing! (Check them out if you haven’t yet.) As a result of the cancer procedures, I lost 40 pounds: How terrific is that? I’m back to the weight I was at 28 years old (I’m now 74); I have a lovely wardrobe (my pre-cancer clothes had to be replaced), and I have lots of shoes.

My advice: Never think your darkest days will define your future.

It may just be that, in time, the best is yet to come. So, we make trades. I may eat differently, but on the other hand, shoes are nice — especially red ones.

LIVE EXERCISE CLASSES WITH MSK EXPERTS — FROM HOME

After cancer treatment, many people see changes in their body mass, muscle strength, and bone health. With Memorial Sloan Kettering’s **Integrative Medicine at Home** membership program, a team of clinical fitness and mind-body instructors will guide you to having more energy, more muscle strength, and more motivation. Enjoy a variety of exercise and wellness classes from wherever you are. Connect with this online community of cancer survivors today. Learn more and register online at [MSK.org/AtHome](https://www.msk.org/AtHome) or call **646-888-0800**.

Life Is a Marathon

By Tony Gonzalez

I have been an endurance runner for most of my life.

I ran my first marathon when I was 15 in Monmouth County, New Jersey. I ran the New York City Marathon almost 20 years ago (in 2003), and I am running it again this November as a cancer survivor. *This issue of Bridges went to press prior to the 2021 marathon.

In March 2020, just as the COVID-19 pandemic locked down New York City, where I live, I was diagnosed with high-grade, stage II/III, muscle invasive bladder cancer and began treatment with an amazing team of doctors at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. I underwent three months of chemotherapy and immunotherapy treatments during the summer months of the pandemic and then had neobladder surgery on October 1, 2020. The surgery involved the removal of my bladder and the construction of a new one using a piece of my small intestine. My prostate and lymph nodes in my pelvic area were also removed. (Prior to my surgery, I began a five-month course of treatment with blood thinners to address a blood clot in my iliac vein and to prevent any new blood clots from forming post-surgery). Needless to say, most of 2020 was an incredibly challenging year for me, not only because I lived in an area with some of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths, but also because of my cancer diagnosis.

While undergoing chemotherapy and immunotherapy treatments during the summer, I continued to run. While I was not able to run nearly as many miles as I did pre-cancer due to the fatigue caused by chemo, I endured. Running gave me much confidence and strength as well as a sense of peace during a very difficult time. After my course of chemo treatments ended in July, I had a couple of months “break” before undergoing my surgery.

It was then that I decided I would run the New York City marathon again, with the goal of doing it the following year in 2021. As my energy began to increase, I was able to again do longer and longer runs, and by September, I was doing eight and 10-mile runs and averaging 30 miles per week. I had also continued weight training throughout my entire cancer treatment, even while undergoing chemo. “Strength and endurance” was my mantra, and I believe it helped me tremendously during my post-surgery recovery. Today, I feel stronger and healthier with every passing day. I’m getting used to the new bladder and have been able to resume all normal activity. And the best news is the biopsy post-surgery showed no physical evidence of the cancer spreading beyond my bladder and, most recently, my three-month post-surgery scans showed no visible evidence of the cancer having spread. I can say, with confidence, I am now cancer free!

With the New Year, I began slowly rebuilding my endurance and resuming longer and longer runs, with the goal to complete the New York City marathon this coming November 2021, two days before my 56th birthday.

Tony Gonzalez is an artist currently living in New York City and Hudson, New York. In addition to working as a fine art photographer, Gonzalez has taught photography for over 25 years, including at The Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and New York University. Since 2002, Gonzalez has been teaching full-time at Queens College, City University New York, and is currently a tenured professor. Gonzalez is also an avid endurance runner and recent cancer survivor.

Ask the Professional

Survivorship Includes Anxiety and Depression

By Marie Barnett, PhD

Are cancer survivors, as a young adult or older adult, at greater risk for anxiety and depression than others?

Cancer survivors of all ages experience normal challenges that may occur throughout the stages of life, but after a cancer diagnosis, they may experience *new* normal challenges. The experience of living with and living through a cancer diagnosis and treatment can increase an individual's level of anxiety and depression compared with those without cancer experience.

Cancer of any site is most frequently diagnosed among people ages 65 to 74. Notably, about 70,000 adolescents and young adults (AYAs) ages 15 to 39 are diagnosed annually — which makes up about 5% of all cancers. AYAs uniquely face numerous life changes and developmental milestones at a pace faster than older adults, making the impact of cancer potentially more intense, significant, and disruptive — particularly on mental health.

What is anxiety and depression?

Anxiety and depression fit under the umbrella of mental health, which is defined by our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Mental health is impacted by biological factors, life experiences, and family history. Anxiety disorders are the most common group of mental illnesses in the US, and about 7% of US adults have reported at least one major depressive episode.

While both worries and sadness can be normal and healthy, anxiety can lead to excessive nervousness, fear, apprehension, and worry — and impede our daily functioning and goals. Similarly, depression can range from mild to severe and include feeling sad, a loss of interest in activities, changes in appetite or sleep, fatigue, and difficulty focusing. Some describe depression as seeing the world through blue-tinted glasses, where everything around you is a shade blue.



Marie Barnett, PhD, Clinical Psychologist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, has worked in the field of psychosocial oncology for over five years. She joined MSK's Departments of Pediatrics and Psychiatry & Behavioral Science in 2017 and works with children, adolescents, and young adults from diagnosis into survivorship.

Does depression or anxiety look the same for every cancer survivor?

The symptoms and impact of anxiety and depression can be unique for every survivor. As a psychologist, I work with individuals to help them understand, acknowledge, and learn to regulate their own spectrum of emotions. We all feel worried or sad sometimes — but is it getting in the way of your goals, taking away from your relationships, or impacting your personality? As a cancer survivor, anxiety about health and your body may present differently than someone without experience with a serious medical condition. Acknowledging this and giving yourself validation for your experience and noticing when you may need more support is important. Additionally, anxiety and depression are brain-based disorders, and can benefit from psychiatry interventions, including medications.

One approach to a deeper understanding of your individual emotional states is by comparing yourself to yourself. What is your level of anxiety at different times of the day, week, or year? Do you notice patterns in your own emotional states in different situations? Try monitoring this over a few days or weeks. Notice what about your environment or your own types of thoughts might impact your emotions. Be curious about what you can control and what you cannot control.

But I should be happy! I should be grateful!

I commonly hear phrases like:

"I should be ____"

"I should feel ____"

"I should be happy. I don't have cancer anymore."

"Why do I feel upset or down when people say,

'You look good'?"

It is important to validate your own feelings and explore where these comments of comparison, assumptions, and expectations come from. During and post-treatment you may be faced with ongoing changes in your values, goals, and most importantly, what you expect of yourself. Depression and anxiety may even increase post-treatment. Some experience this because they are not focused solely on medical treatment and are required to manage their pre-existing life and responsibilities outside of cancer treatment while also processing what they went through physically and emotionally during treatment.

What can I do for myself if I'm feeling more anxious or down?

Be honest with yourself and prioritize your mental health like you do with your physical health. Make a list of what recharges your battery (e.g., friends, activities, exercise) and what drains your battery (e.g., social media, work schedules, poor boundaries). Identify the things that you can control versus things that you cannot, and try focusing on the areas in your life that you can control. Many benefit from using cognitive tools learned in therapy (challenging our thinking, problem-solving), mindfulness (acceptance, living more in the moment),

or behavioral tools (setting schedules or daily goals, action-oriented skills).

Acknowledge that we are not meant to do everything alone. Approach your family and social supports to ask for help, and if symptoms are persistent, seeking professional support is valid, appropriate, and recommended.

Why might the COVID-19 pandemic, holidays, or other events impact or increase anxiety and depression?

There are many reasons these aspects of our environment or the time of year may impact us emotionally. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a drastic shift in our daily lives and living and greatly reduced social interactions. For many survivors, this can trigger memories of isolation, thoughts of mortality, and fears during their cancer treatment. Additionally, holidays or anniversaries can add more stressors, including navigating family dynamics or negotiating expectations of ourselves and others.

I would like to talk with someone further about my feelings of depression or anxiety. Who should I get in touch with?

If you would like to connect with a mental health provider, reach out to your medical team or social worker for a referral to an MSK provider or program or for assistance identifying an appropriate community resource or provider to address your unique needs. There are many ways to address and improve our emotional well-being, including talk therapies, medication, and integrative medicine approaches.

Resources for Life After Cancer (RLAC)

RLAC welcomes survivors to participate in programs that encourage healing through education and support to live well after cancer. Please see the online calendar at: [MSKCC.org/SWcalendar](https://www.mskcc.org/SWcalendar)

Mindfulness Classes from MSK's Team of Experts:

Mind-body practices, including meditation, yoga, and tai chi, can help reduce the impact of anxiety and depression in your daily life. MSK's Integrative Medicine at Home membership program offers online mind-body classes you can enjoy from wherever you are. Connect with our online community of cancer survivors and learn effective self-care tools to care for yourself.

Join online today at [MSK.org/AtHome](https://www.mskcc.org/AtHome) or call **646-888-0800** to learn more.

MSK Counseling Center

Counselors at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center offer services for individuals, couples, and families. Our counselors, which includes both psychiatrists and psychologists, are also available to patients during their hospital stay.

Phone: **646-888-0100**

Teen and Young Adult Program

The Teen and Young Adult Program at MSK offers services to decrease isolation and improve connectivity between patients and their peers. For more information about the program or to join our private social media platform, The Lounge, please contact us at tyaprogram@mskcc.org

Survivor Insights: Telemedicine

“ There has been a huge benefit for me. I drive four hours in each direction to get to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. So, every telemedicine visit has saved me eight hours of driving! I wish that I had done a test run with my computer equipment because it didn't work effectively until I switched from my phone to my laptop. I spent a year doing Zoom meetings at work, which allowed me to get more and more comfortable with this type of communication before my first telemedicine visit. I would definitely use telemedicine in the future. I enjoyed the visit. I felt that the communication was nearly as personal and comprehensive as an in-person visit, and it saved a lot of commuting time. ”

— Robert

“ It was great to still be able to have the appointments during the heart of the pandemic, which kept my family and my medical team safe! Try it out; it's great if you live far [away] to be able to still see your medical team and get the information needed without the time and cost of the commute to New York City. It's always nice to see your medical team face to face, however, with bad weather and the commute, this will still work for the future. ”

— Alex

“ Using telemedicine was beneficial because I was afraid to travel during the pandemic but wanted the comfort of speaking with my doctor. Don't let it bother you that it's a telemedicine conference. Seeing the doctor is very reassuring. I would have no problems using telemedicine in the future as it takes me quite a while to travel to the appointment and would save me the expense of parking. ”

— Mark

“ It saves a trip to the office, which reduces any health risks we may encounter by being out in public. It is very convenient and equally effective, so long as a physical examination is not required. I wish I was given the option sooner. If you can replace an office visit with telemedicine, do it! ”

— Nicole



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Connections

MSK's online community for patients and caregivers. It provides a venue for conversations, support, questions, and companionship.

To register, visit:
www.mskcc.org/connections

Patient Support Program Rising Voices “Something to Sing About”

Rising Voices is a lively singing group open to MSK patients, caregivers, and survivors. Rehearsals are held via Zoom. Rising Voices is a free and supportive program sponsored by Integrative Medicine and Volunteer Resources.

To join, please go to our website
www.mskcc.org/RisingVoices.

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