



Cancer Q & A

with Kathy Kanavos

YOUR CONCERNS ABOUT CANCER

Dear Kathy,

Since starting chemotherapy I no longer feel attractive. I think I have lost my self-esteem. Do you have any suggestions for me on what to do to get it back?

Linda in Palm Desert

Dear Linda,

I remember feeling exactly as you do. But after going through cancer treatment twice, I realized my self-esteem was only misplaced, not lost. Here are some suggestions to help you rediscover yours during this difficult time.

If you lose your hair, help yourself look and feel good physically by wearing a wig, hat, or scarf. Try them all and then decide which one you feel most comfortable wearing. During the winter I combined both a wig and hat and that kept my bald head toasty warm. Wear a prosthesis if you have had a breast removed. I chose to wear shoulder pads in my bra while my implants were expanding.

Eating right and exercising can help your body stay strong and keep your spirits up. I exercised nightly to release tension and that helped me to sleep better. Practice relaxation techniques such as meditation and seek professional help if you think you are still depressed from loss of self-esteem. Remember, this difficult time will pass. Please stay in touch because we care.

Dear Kathy,

My doctor told me that my cancer treatment will put me into early menopause. Did you experience this and what were your symptoms?

Debbie in California

Dear Debbie,

Yes, my chemotherapy put me into early or premature menopause. Symptoms are often more severe than the slow changes that happen during natural menopause. The loss of estrogen from therapy can trigger hot flashes and vagina atrophy (a condition when the vagina becomes tight and dry), difficulty sleeping and concentrating. However, I found that over time my body adjusted naturally to these changes and now I no longer suffer from any of those symptoms.

The body has an amazing capacity for healing. If you are unduly bothered by the symptoms of early menopause please consult your doctor.

Dear Kathy,

I am very surprised by the people I considered to be close friends who have not called and don't seem to want to be friends with me now that I have been diagnosed with cancer. This is making me very sad and I don't know what to do about it.

Banita

Dear Banita,

One of the most unpleasant surprises for some of us diagnosed with cancer is the change in friendship that it can bring. I also found this to be true and like you, I wondered if I had done something to promote it.

While talking to my Radiation Group during treatment, I realized almost all of the women talked of the unexpected reactions of friends to their cancer news. Even long-time friends had simply disappeared. On the other hand, others whom I barely knew became close, lifelong friends. Two of the important lessons I learned during my years of treatment is that any life crisis results in the loss of some friends and the gain of other, and that a crisis will separate your friends from your acquaintances. Remember that how someone treats you is their Karma; how you respond to it is yours.

Please email your questions to
kathykanavos@yahoo.com

Dear Kathy,

My husband seems to be afraid to touch me sexually. What can I do to put his mind at ease and resume our sexual life during my cancer treatment? Can we have normal sex?

Donna

Dear Donna,

It sounds like you have a wonderful and caring husband who is afraid of hurting you during your treatment. I applaud you for stepping forward to share your questions and concerns so that others may learn from them.

During my treatment I went through similar concerns and spoke with my doctor because chemotherapy temporarily made certain areas of my body less "moist and flexible." I told my husband that I was going to talk to my doctor about sex and asked him if he had any questions he wanted me to ask the doctor for him. Then we discussed what I learned. This opened the doors to productive sexual discussions.

I wrote an article for [CapeWomenOnline Magazine](#) that answered many questions concerning sex during chemotherapy. I hope it answers more of your questions and addresses your concerns. I found that this difficulty was a temporary condition. And remember: Normal sex is whatever gives you and your partner pleasure together, so relax and enjoy!

Dear Kathy,

Since being diagnosed with cancer, I find that I am flooded with negative thoughts and I can't seem to control them. They often overwhelm me with depression. What can I do to stop these thoughts? I am not a negative person by nature.

Karen in Florida

Dear Karen,

I remember having negative and depressing thoughts after I was diagnosed with cancer. Looking back ten years later, I think this is a perfectly normal reaction to a devastating time in your life.

However, staying in that negative state of mind is not good. Your thoughts are important to your overall health during treatment. Become more aware of what you think, what is going on in your life, and how you feel about yourself.

If negative thoughts continue to intrude and you find yourself overwhelmed or discouraged, you may want to speak with your cancer team about working with a mental health professional. I did, and found my therapist extremely helpful.

It is common to experience grief and loss linked to your cancer diagnosis and treatment. Your old life has disappeared. You may also notice sadness, anger, and even hostility toward those close to you. Cancer changes your sense of how you think of your body and yourself. It can also affect your ability to maintain your relationships and you need your relationships right now. They are your support system.

Here is a helpful way I tackled my negative thoughts. I wrote down the three most common negative thoughts I had and then rewrote them in the positive way and carried the list with me. When I would have a negative thought, I would immediately take out my list and read it in a positive way. An example is "No one wants to make love to a woman with stitches in her breast from a lumpectomy or mastectomy." A positive rewrite might be, "I can wear a lacy top over my breast and look and feel really sexy." Over time the negative thoughts were replaced by my new positive thoughts. I looked and felt better.

Use your positive thoughts to override the negative ones you usually have, and good luck.

Kathleen O'Keefe-Kanavos is a cancer survivor and an agented author of SURVIVING CANCERLAND: The Psychic Aspects of Healing. She is currently working on her second book, SURVIVING RECURRENCE in CANCERLAND: The Dream World and Healing. Visit her [web site](#) and her [blog](#) .

In addition to answering readers' cancer questions for [CapeWomenOnline.com](#), Kathleen is a phone counselor for the R.A. BLOCH Cancer Foundation and a breast cancer mentor for WE CAN. Her articles about her experiences appear on many blogs and discussion groups. She also volunteers for many cancer organizations and online cancer support groups. Follow her on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)

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