

You Don't Have to Go It Alone

Patient Navigators Can Help You Chart Your Course Through Cancer

by Carole O'Toole, MS, and Erin Price Schabert



A common experience for people living with cancer – whether they are newly diagnosed, in treatment, dealing with a recurrence, or in survivorship – is the feeling of being overwhelmed by all the information given them and the multiple, often difficult decisions they must make. The healthcare system can be daunting when any of us is dealing with a routine health issue. But with cancer, it can feel nearly impossible to manage it all.

Fortunately, there are professionals whose job it is to help guide survivors and caregivers through the cancer maze. These individuals are called *patient navigators*.

What do patient navigators do?

Patient navigators work one-on-one with cancer survivors and their caregivers to help them manage their cancer care and best utilize the healthcare system to find the support they need. Navigators help to address many of the practical issues and physical barriers that may stand in the way of cancer survivors getting adequate and timely care. Navigation services might include helping you schedule appointments, giving you information about your diagnosis or what to expect with treatment, coordinating

communication with your medical team, and connecting you with resources to help with financial, insurance, or logistical problems.

Who are patient navigators?

Navigators come from a variety of professional backgrounds, and include clinical professionals, such as nurses and social workers. Cancer survivors and cancer advocates can also serve as navigators, and are sometimes called *peer navigators*. Nurse navigators specialize in addressing clinical needs, while social



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workers serving as navigators focus on offering psychosocial support and resources. Some navigators may aid any patient dealing with cancer, while others specialize in certain types of cancer or focus on a particular point of the cancer continuum, such as survivorship.

Another type of navigator is an *integrative navigator*. These professionals also work to remove barriers to cancer care and provide support to survivors and their caregivers; however, they have an additional focus. Integrative navigators offer education and guidance in the responsible selection and use of appropriate, evidence-based complementary therapies – such as nutrition, acupuncture, and stress-reduction techniques – alongside conventional medical treatment.

Where can I find a patient navigator?

Navigation services are rich and varied. You can find navigators working in a variety of settings, including hospitals, clinics and cancer centers, community organizations, churches, and even private practice. Most navigation services offered through organizations or facilities will be at no cost, while private practice navigators may charge a fee for their services.

Regardless of the type and background of your navigator, all are committed to getting you the support you need, reducing your stress, and improving your quality of life as you navigate the cancer experience.

Get Connected with a Patient Navigator

If you're interested in accessing patient navigation resources, here are the best ways to connect with a navigator.

- ◆ Speak with the hospital, cancer center, or doctor's office where you are being treated and ask if they have a patient navigator on staff.
- ◆ Contact one of the following national organizations:
 - ◇ American Cancer Society
800-ACS-2345, cancer.org
 - ◇ Livestrong
855-220-7777, livestrong.org
 - ◇ Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults
410-964-0202, ext. 106, ulmanfund.org
- ◆ To find an integrative navigator, contact the Institute for Integrative Oncology Navigation at Smith Center for Healing and the Arts 202-483-8600, smithcenter.org.
- ◆ Ask your local cancer organizations about patient navigators.
- ◆ Check out local churches with health ministries. They may have community navigators that can assist you.

Carole O'Toole is a 23-year survivor of advanced cancer and the director of Integrative Navigation at Smith Center for Healing and the Arts in Washington, DC, a nonprofit organization offering supportive resources for people affected by cancer nationwide. The author of two books on integrative cancer care, she leads Smith Center's Navigation Team and directs retreats for people with cancer and their caregivers. Erin Price Schabert is a six-year cancer survivor and is the manager of Navigation Programs at Smith Center for Healing and the Arts. Erin helped establish the DC Young Adult Cancer Community and is now pursuing a master's degree in Social Work, focusing on oncology support and counseling.