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 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.

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