

You, Yourself, and Cancer

How to feel less lonely if you have to go it alone.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN

LISA HUSKEY spent the morning of her lumpectomy surrounded by family: her husband, Chris; their four kids; her sister-in-law. Until the last moments before surgery, they chatted, prayed, and held one another close. Afterward, during Huskey's recovery, friends brought banana bread, casseroles, and their undivided attention. It was February, and Covid-19 had yet to hit their rural town of Rock Hill, South Carolina.

Things were very different in April when Huskey, 51, visited her oncologist to learn whether she'd need chemotherapy. Guests were no longer permitted at the center, so Chris, who had accompanied his wife

to every appointment, had to wait outside. "It was my first 'Oh my gosh, I have to do this by myself' moment," Huskey says.

When you're going through cancer, your support network becomes a lifeline and safety net. On a practical level, friends and family can drive you to appointments or pitch in with childcare. But research shows that strong social support also enhances your ability to cope with problems, boosts self-esteem (which in turn could buffer against depression), and can help counteract the effects of stress on the immune and cardiovascular systems. Indeed, it can be a matter of life and death: A recent study of 1,431 women

diagnosed with colorectal cancer found that those who reported having low social support had 42 percent higher mortality from their cancer than those with high levels of support. Thankfully, there are ways to feel less alone—whether you're quarantining during a pandemic or are for any reason distant from family and friends.

Connect with cancer survivors online. Pre-Covid, Marisa Davidson, 37, from Turnersville, New Jersey, used Living Beyond Breast Cancer's online support group and Facebook page to talk with other women about everything from participating in clinical trials to parenting while recovering from a bilateral mastectomy (she has a 2-year-old and twin 7-year-olds). Over the summer, while cut off from extended family, Davidson relied even more on the strangers who, she says, very quickly turned into friends. "These women are in my shoes—quarantined, many of them with babies," she says. When stores closed during Covid-19 shutdowns, she turned to the group for tips about shopping for wigs online. One woman, also a mom of three, sent Davidson messages of encouragement before every chemo session.

Besides member-led groups, there are survivor mentorship programs (see "Tech Support," page 59), and the nonprofit Stupid Cancer hosts weekly online meetups for adults under 40 living with cancer. "Peer partner" programs, like Imerman Angels or the Young Survival Coalition, match patients with survivors for virtual and online support.

Video chat with a pro. More than a third of people with cancer may develop psychological distress, according to Wendy Baer, MD, a psychiatrist at Emory University's Winship Cancer Institute—and that's not even during a pandemic. Fortunately, mental health professionals are just a click away. If you don't have a therapist, ask your oncologist for a referral to someone who specializes in

cancer patients. Baer notes that the rest of your team—oncology nurses, cancer navigators, nutritionists, spiritual health advisers—are also likely available to chat via video.

Befriend endorphins. Javacia Harris Bowser's 2020 New Year's resolution was to walk for at least 30 minutes every day. On January 24, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She's stuck to her resolution, though, striding through months that included a lumpectomy and weekly and then biweekly chemo. "When I walk, I feel like myself again," says Bowser, 39, from Birmingham, Alabama. Explains Pamela Ginsberg, PhD, a staff psychologist specializing in psycho-oncology at Doylestown Hospital in Pennsylvania: "Exercise, especially during chemo, helps improve mood and energy levels." And you don't need anyone to join you (except maybe your favorite podcast host).

If exercise feels unmanageable, Baer recommends music to distract from stress and humor to spark the release of feel-good, pain-relieving endorphins. (Comedian Tig Notaro jokes boldly about her cancer in her stand-up and on her show *One Mississippi*.)

Recruit a team. Let others know how they can help you. "People want to be useful," Baer says, especially in times of global or personal crisis—but they might not know exactly how. Ask your colleagues, condo association, or religious organization whether they can coordinate a meal train for you, or post on a local online message board requesting help with the lawn or trash pickup.

And if you know someone who has cancer, reach out in whatever way you can. During Huskey's first chemo session in May, dozens of relatives and friends surprised her with a 20-minute video montage. Even though she had a drug nicknamed Red Devil coursing through her veins, Huskey says that with their voices and smiles emanating from her phone, she felt as much love and joy as she did on her wedding day.

