

HEALTH CARE

Cancer Coaches Help Guide Patients During and After Treatment

Advisers can assist with everything from spiritual issues to the nuts and bolts of going back to work once treatment is done



When Tom Loeswick was overwhelmed by his cancer diagnosis, a coach helped him come to terms with it so he could focus on treatment.

PHOTO: LISA WISEMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Barbara Sadick

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Tom Loeswick has faced a series of illnesses in his life, but when he was diagnosed with stage 3 lymphoma in 2012 at the age of 61, he felt helpless, emotionally drained and disconnected.

Overwhelmed, Mr. Loeswick turned to cancer coach Shariann Tom. Ms. Tom, a five-time cancer survivor and former executive coach, helped Mr. Loeswick understand the emotions he was feeling—especially anger—and helped him move forward, he says.

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“I was angry at being sick, and I was angry at God,” says Mr. Loeswick, now a coach for people with chronic illnesses such as cancer and diabetes in Los Gatos, Calif. “But with Shariann helping me prevent myself from sinking into deep potholes, I was able to make it through the experience.”

For a growing number of cancer patients, cancer coaches—some of whom have had cancer themselves—offer help with the physical, emotional and intellectual challenges that can arise during and after treatment. The coaches give advice in such areas as nutrition, exercise, weight management and other health issues. They also address spiritual concerns and the nuts and bolts of going back to work after treatment is done.

Help focusing

“It’s a hard feeling when cancer gets better and support disappears,” says Dean Felsher, a professor of oncology at the Cancer Institute at Stanford Medicine, the medical school of Stanford University. “That’s when a person needs to focus on how they have been affected by the experience and its treatment; cancer coaching is a good option to do just that.”

For patients and families, however, a lack of regulation and certification can make it challenging to assess such specialists. What’s more, their services can be expensive, costing \$100 to \$300 a session, and typically aren’t covered by insurance.

In the U.S., there are several groups that offer training and certification for health and other kinds of coaching. A recent partnership between the International Consortium for Health and Wellness Coaching and the National Board of Medical Examiners launched a National Board for Health and Wellness Coaching to create requirements and standards. The International Coach Federation is another certification board. But these groups don't offer certifications specifically in cancer coaching.

In addition, some critics argue that cancer centers already provide much of the support that cancer coaches say they offer.

“If the hospital oncology team is doing a good job, patients should be getting all the medical and supportive services they need before, during and after treatment without having to pay for it,” says Lillie Shockney, an oncology nurse navigator and administrative director of the Johns Hopkins Breast Center in Baltimore.

Cancer coaches, though, say hospitals sometimes fall short, which is where they come in. “Hospitals often have limited resources, so when coaches are available to support patients in taking a more active role in their cancer care, it benefits everyone,” says the American Cancer Society's Dawn Wiatrek, strategic director, cancer treatment access.

The society recently received a \$1.5 million grant from the Merck Foundation to offer coach training to patient navigators at cancer centers. Initially, training is taking place at centers in New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Fort Worth, Texas, Albuquerque, N.M., and Tacoma, Wash., with plans to expand in spring 2019.

“We are providing our navigators with tools that allow them to better tailor the support they are providing to patients, while encouraging patients to become more engaged in managing the barriers they are facing in accessing quality care,” Ms. Wiatrek says. “This approach offers benefits for the patient, the navigator and the health system.”

‘Residual trauma’

In addition, there are those instances where individuals seek out, or are referred to, independent coaches for extra help.

Paula Holland De Long of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., certified by the International Coaching Federation as an associate certified coach, helps people recover from cancer. Ms. De Long, a cancer survivor herself, says she got her start as a volunteer for the American Cancer

Society in Texas, where, among other roles, she became a trainer for breast-cancer visitation programs. During that time, Ms. De Long says, she discovered that the emotional challenges of recovering from cancer are universal.

“Survivors who are ending treatment and creating new normal lives benefit most from my work,” she says. “The residual trauma of the chaotic experience and loss of regular contact with the health-care team are significant.... The desire to be healthier to prevent recurrence, make the most of their time and give back in some way are fairly universal themes for survivors, who may not know how to successfully make changes,” she says.

Ms. De Long gets referrals from nurses and social workers at hospitals in south Florida and other states. After an initial assessment, she says, her client relationships typically last from 90 days to 18 months, and she charges around \$100 per hour.

Ms. Tom, the coach who helped Mr. Loeswick, is a co-founder of Cancer Journey, a San Francisco-based company that coaches its clients—patients, survivors or caregivers—on dealing with the challenges of cancer. The service, which started in 2007, offers counseling by phone or in person if one of its coaches is available where a client lives. Clients generally use the service three times a month for three to six months, and, depending on the type of coaching, pay \$100 to \$167 for each 45-minute session, Ms. Tom says. The company also trains coaches, with training typically taking 10 months and costing \$9,000.

When Ms. Tom was first diagnosed with cancer in 1998, she says, she couldn’t cope or figure out how to proceed with a meaningful life, and her family, friends and cancer professionals were unable to help her. She later discovered life coaching and entered the Coaches Training Institute. Not long after that, she says, she and co-founder Keri Lehmann created Cancer Journey.

Alison Gause, an oncology patient navigator at the Cancer Institute of Marin General Hospital in Marin County, Calif., says she sometimes refers patients to cancer coaches when they are finished with treatment. Because cancer patients are often faced with their own mortality, they want to move forward in ways that are new and different from before, Ms. Gause says.

“It’s about being mindful of how a person wants to live after treatment is over,” she says, “and working with a trained coach can help people tap into their own inner strengths and resources.”

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