

**ECHO IDAHO**

Cancer Survivorship

# Survivorship and Mental Health: Understanding the Psychological Impact of Life After Cancer

3/25/2026

Hayley Woodring, LCSW

None of the planners or presenters for this educational activity have relevant financial relationship(s) to disclose with ineligible companies whose primary business is producing, marketing, selling, re-selling, or distributing healthcare products used by or on patients.



**University of Idaho**  
School of Health and Medical  
Professions



# Learning Objectives

## Define

Define oncology survivorship and describe its implications for long-term psychosocial care

## Recognize

Recognize indicators for referral to mental health services

## Explain

Explain why psychological distress may increase after active treatment ends

## Demonstrate

Demonstrate how to guide patients in locating appropriate mental health providers

# Survivorship

“In cancer, survivorship focuses on the health and well-being of a person with cancer from the time of diagnosis until the end of life. This includes the physical, mental, emotional, social, and financial effects of cancer that begin at diagnosis and continue through treatment and beyond. The survivorship experience also includes issues related to follow-up care (including regular health and wellness checkups), late effects of treatment, cancer recurrence, second cancers, and quality of life. Family members, friends, and caregivers are also considered part of the survivorship experience.”

*Source: National Cancer Institute*

# Common Mental Health Experiences In Survivorship

- Anxiety (including fear of recurrence and scan anxiety)
- Depression
- Chronic Stress
- Existential Distress
- Trauma responses (including medical trauma and hypervigilance)
- Identity disruption
- Relationship strain

Approximately 1 in 3 cancer survivors experience clinically significant psychological distress. Emotional recovery does not always align with physical recovery.

## Why Does Distress Often Increase After Treatment?

---

Reduced medical contact

---

Loss of structured support

---

Increased uncertainty

---

Pressure to feel “grateful” or “back to normal”

---

Delayed emotional processing

---

Feeling less supported once treatment ends

# Fear of Recurrence

Fear of recurrence is one of the most persistent psychological challenges in survivorship.



SCAN ANXIETY



HYPERVIGILANCE TO  
PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS



CATASTROPHIC  
THINKING



AVOIDANCE OF  
FOLLOW-UP CARE

# Identity and Role Changes

- “Who am I now?”
- Body image changes
- Sexual health and intimacy changes
- Career disruption
- Shifts in family roles

Survivorship often involves redefining identity, not returning to a previous one.

# Survivor Guilt

Survivor guilt is distress experienced when someone survives an illness while others do not, or when others have more severe outcomes.

Common thoughts:

“Why did I survive?”

“I don’t deserve to feel upset.”

“Others had it worse.”

“Why don’t I feel more relieved now that treatment is over?”

# Clinical Considerations for Survivor Guilt

- Acknowledge survivor guilt as a common and understandable part of grief
- Recognize that it often occurs alongside grief and trauma
- Listen for unhelpful thinking patterns (“It should have been me”)
- Gently explore beliefs about responsibility and control
- Help individuals make sense of their experience in a meaningful way
- Encourage connection with others to reduce isolation

# When to Refer to Mental Health Support

## More Visible Signs

- Persistent sadness, anxiety, or irritability
- Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities they once enjoyed
- Changes in sleep, appetite, or energy
- Difficulty concentrating or feeling overwhelmed by medical follow-ups

## Less Visible Signs

- Minimizing struggles or feeling they “should just be grateful” to be alive
- Staying excessively busy or overworking to avoid thinking about their experience
- Avoiding conversations about cancer or survivorship
- Feeling emotionally numb, disconnected, or uncertain about their identity or future

*Remember: Mental health care should be integrated, not reserved for crisis.*

# Types of Mental Health Support

Individual Counseling

Support Groups

Psychiatry

Spiritual Care

Community Resources

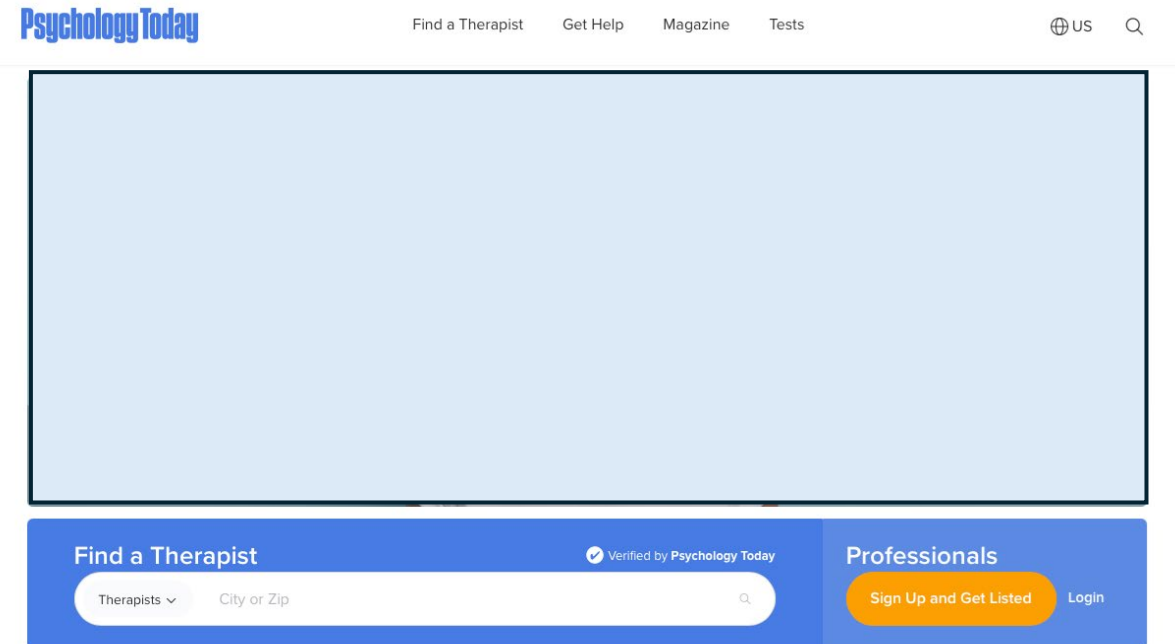
# How to Find a Mental Health Provider

- Internal Referral to Clinic Staff
  - Social Work, Psychiatry, Mental Health Therapists, etc.
- Online Directories
  - Psychology Today
  - TherapyDen
  - GoodTherapy
  - Therapy Finder
- Insurance Company Provider Directories
- Public Treatment Locators
  - SAMHSA
  - State or County Behavioral Health Websites

# How to Use Online Directories

## 1. Search

- Enter your city or ZIP code
- Click search



# How to Use Online Directories

## 2. Filter Results

- Insurance, concerns, age group
- Preferences (gender, approach, telehealth/in-person)

The screenshot displays the Psychology Today website interface for searching therapists in zip code 83712. At the top, the navigation bar includes the Psychology Today logo, a search bar with 'Therapists' selected, a location dropdown set to 'US', a 'Log In' link, and a 'Sign Up and Get Listed' button. Below the navigation, the breadcrumb path is 'Home > Idaho > 83712', followed by the heading 'Therapists in 83712'. A row of filter buttons includes 'Female', 'Male', 'In Person', 'Online', and 'All Filters'. A 'Filters' modal is open, showing options to 'Show only therapists who are...' (Female, Male, Non-Binary) and 'How would you like to see your therapists?' (In Person, Online, Available). The modal also lists various filter categories: Specialities, Insurance, Types of Therapy, Age, Ethnicity, Sexuality, Language, Faith, and Price.

# How to Use Online Directories

## 3. Review Profiles

- Read bios and specialties
- Check fees, insurance, and availability

## 4. Choose & Reach Out

- Contact for availability or consultation

The screenshot shows the Psychology Today website interface for finding therapists in Boise, ID 83712. The page features a search bar at the top with 'Therapists' selected and a search icon. Below the search bar, there are filters for 'Female', 'Male', 'In Person', and 'Online', along with an 'All Filters' button. Three therapist profiles are displayed, each with a placeholder for a profile picture, a name field, a title and location, a bio, and contact options for 'Phone Number', 'Email', and 'View'.

**Psychology Today** Therapists City, Zip or Name US Log In Sign Up and Get Listed

Home > Idaho > 83712

### Therapists in 83712

Female Male In Person Online All Filters

**Name**  
Clinical Social Work/Therapist, LCSW 8 Endorsed  
Boise, ID 83712  
Are you struggling with issues related to the demands of motherhood/being a woman, trauma, depression, anxiety, major life changes, low self esteem, or ADHD/nuerodivergence? The offices at Sugar Pine Counseling are judgement free zones and all therapists...

**Phone Number**  
Email  
View

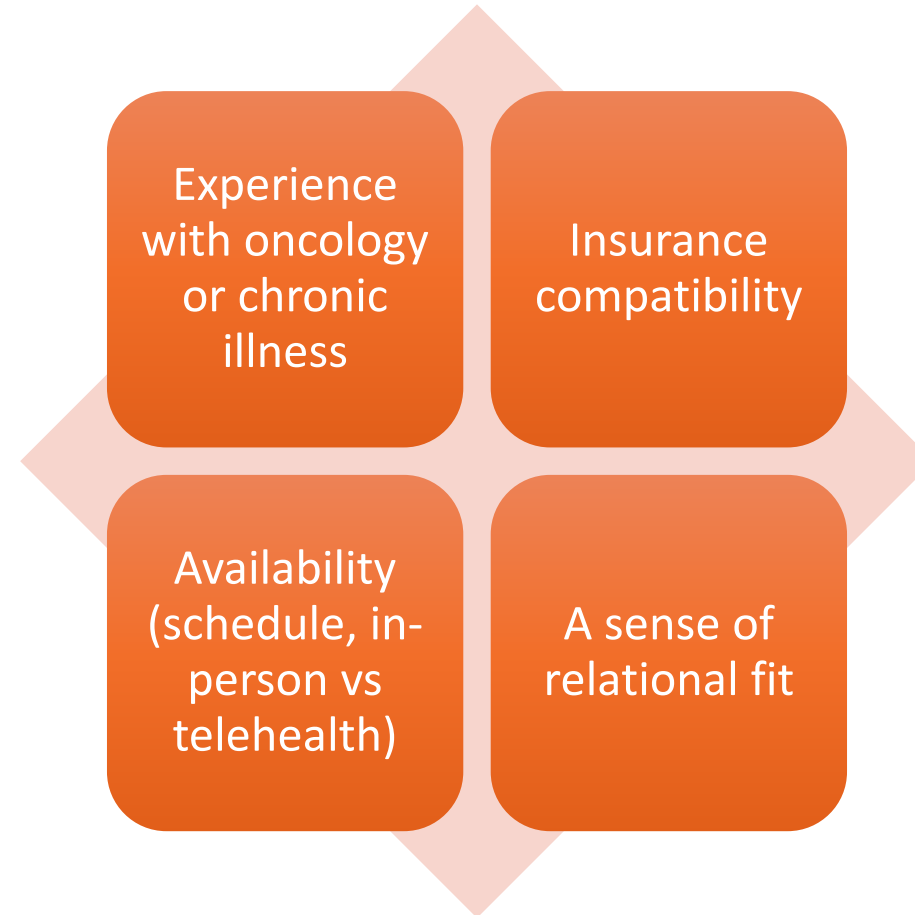
**Name**  
Clinical Social Work/Therapist, LMSW 4 Endorsed  
Boise, ID 83712  
Do you feel stuck in a cycle with yourself, your relationships, or your family? I work in the modality of Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), a proven approach to breaking negative patterns by addressing underlying emotions and creating meaningful change. I also bring ex...

**Phone Number**  
Email  
View

**Name**  
Verified 7 Endorsed  
Boise, ID 83712  
You've been living in survival mode for years, carrying a heavy

**Phone Number**  
Email

# What to Look for in a Mental Health Provider



# Key Takeaways

---

Emotional impact often outlasts medical treatment.

---

Survivor guilt is common and treatable.

---

Mental health care should be integrated into survivorship.

---

Accessible tools can reduce barriers to care.

---

Survivorship is not just about living longer but living well.

# References

- Mitchell, A. J., Ferguson, D. W., Gill, J., Paul, J., & Symonds, P. (2013). Depression and anxiety in long-term cancer survivors compared with spouses and healthy controls: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, 31(9), 1059–1067.
- National Cancer Institute. (n.d.). *Choosing a doctor or health care service*. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/managing-care/services>
- National Cancer Institute. (n.d.). *Facing forward: Life after cancer treatment*. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/survivorship/facing-forward>
- National Cancer Institute. (n.d.). *Survivorship*. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/coping/survivorship>
- National Comprehensive Cancer Network. (2023). *Distress management (NCCN Guidelines)*.
- Stanton, A. L. (2012). What happens now? Psychosocial care for cancer survivors after medical treatment completion. *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, 30(11), 1215–1220.