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Briefing Series on the Role of Psychology in Health Care *Adult Cancer*

- Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the U.S. Almost 90% of cancer onset is rooted in environment and behavior (e.g., smoking, poor diet, physical inactivity, sun exposure, alcohol, stress, and obesity).¹ Many cancers can be prevented or successfully treated through early detection, screening, and lifestyle changes.
- The factors of low socioeconomic status and lack of health care coverage are the most significant contributors to disparities in cancer incidence and mortality rates among racial, ethnic, and underserved groups.² Blacks have the highest incidence and mortality rates for each of the most common types of cancer.
- Chemotherapy and radiation therapy are effective treatments for many cancers, yet they can cause and/or exacerbate psychological distress,³⁻⁴ which occurs in up to 40% of all cancer patients.⁵ When psychological distress is untreated, it can adversely influence treatment adherence and the patient's ability to engage in self-care and lead to increased hospital stays and utilization of medical services.⁶
- Anxiety, depression, and decreased quality of life are common concerns of cancer patients.⁷⁻⁸ Up to one in four people with cancer struggles with clinical depression.⁹
- Cognitive difficulties, such as mental cloudiness and problems with attention span and short-term memory, may result from cancer treatment, especially to the brain.¹⁰⁻¹¹
- According to the Institute of Medicine, it is “not possible to deliver good-quality cancer care without using existing approaches, tools, and resources to address patients’ psychosocial health needs” (p.1).¹²
- By the year 2015, cancer care settings accredited by the Commission on Cancer of the American College of Surgeons will be required to implement routine screenings for psychological distress.¹³

| How Psychologists Can Help

- Psychologists are the leading researchers developing evidence-based psychological treatments for cancer patients¹⁴ and have specialized training in assessing, monitoring, and treating residual neurocognitive impairments.¹⁵⁻¹⁶

- Psychotherapy decreases distress, anxiety, and depression; enhances quality of life; and increases treatment adherence, which can all lead to improved long-term health outcomes and reduced costs.¹⁷⁻²⁰
- Psychologists can use many therapeutic approaches to aid cancer patients, including supportive counseling, psychoeducation, problem-solving therapy, stress-management training, mindfulness interventions, and cognitive and behavioral therapies.¹⁸
- Psychologists also provide effective psychological interventions for cancer treatment side effects, such as relaxation techniques and systematic desensitization for anticipatory nausea/vomiting and cognitive behavioral therapy for fatigue.^{21, 22}

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