# Professor Nazanin Derakhshan exposes the long-term mental health struggles of breast cancer survivors



Professor Nazanin Derakhshan's candid reflections on her battle with breast cancer reveal a profound truth that is often overlooked in the conversation surrounding survivorship. While society may champion the triumph over cancer as a victory worthy of celebration, Professor Derakhshan's experience highlights the emotional and psychological struggles that can persist long after the final treatment. Diagnosed in 2013, she was thrust into a world of uncertainty and fear, with her daughter still in early childhood and her professional ambitions hanging in the balance.

In the UK, every 10 minutes, a woman receives a diagnosis of breast cancer. Despite medical advances improving survival rates, the support systems addressing mental health in this context remain woefully inadequate. Research underscores this gap, revealing that long-term survivors are at a heightened risk for anxiety and depression—conditions that can lead to increased mortality rates. The weight of these mental health challenges becomes particularly burdensome for younger women and those lacking robust social support.

Professor Derakhshan's account, punctuated by her emotionally charged recollections, echoes findings from recent studies indicating that symptoms of anxiety and depression can manifest in over ten per cent of breast cancer survivors, a stark contrast to lower prevalence in the general population. Furthermore, factors such as treatment-induced changes—like those she experienced with Tamoxifen, which thrust her into early menopause—add layers of complexity to the emotional landscape survivors must navigate.

Amidst this backdrop, organisations such as Macmillan Cancer Support and Cancer Research UK are striving to fill the void in mental health care for cancer survivors. These organisations advocate for a multifaceted approach to wellbeing, promoting strategies such as mindfulness, creative expression, and physical activities like yoga. Complementary therapies are also highlighted as potential supports, with caution advised in their incorporation into recovery plans.

Community engagement remains essential to advancing mental health support for cancer survivors. For instance, petitions aimed at enhancing access to psychological resources within the National Health Service (NHS) have emerged, signifying a collective call to action for systemic change. The Daily Express, through its Cancer Care campaign, has rallied public support to ensure that emotional care is prioritised alongside physical treatment. This movement recognises that survivorship is not merely about enduring physical treatment but entails a holistic recovery journey where mental health is equally important.

Studies have shown that the repercussions of cancer extend far beyond the initial diagnosis and treatment. Research indicates that the psychological impact can persist for up to a decade or longer, underscoring an urgent need for healthcare providers to address these long-term challenges in their care plans. By acknowledging the emotional upheaval that accompanies the journey of survivorship, the healthcare community can foster resilience in individuals like Professor Derakhshan and countless others, helping them reclaim their lives post-diagnosis.

In a world where the narrative of overcoming cancer tends to overshadow the ongoing battles that patients face, shedding light on these nuanced experiences is crucial. The call for better mental health support is not just a plea; it is a recognition of the complex realities faced by survivors who are often left to navigate their new identities and futures alone.

As Professor Derakhshan poignantly articulates, the expectation to "bounce back" can feel insurmountable when one is forced to grapple with an altered sense of self. The need for systemic change in the approach to post-treatment mental health care is clear, ensuring that every survivor is afforded the care and understanding they deserve.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7
2. Paragraph 4
3. Paragraph 4
4. Paragraph 3
5. Paragraph 3
6. Paragraph 4
7. Paragraph 3

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2058461/my-cancer-battle-survive> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/coping-with-treatment/cancer-and-mental-health-support> - Macmillan Cancer Support provides comprehensive information on managing mental health during and after cancer treatment. The article discusses various strategies to support mental well-being, including writing down feelings, releasing tension through activities like walking or music, and making time to relax. It also highlights the benefits of mindfulness and meditation, offering resources such as the Be Mindful website for learning mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Additionally, the article covers complementary therapies like yoga, massage, and acupuncture, emphasizing the importance of consulting with healthcare professionals before starting any new therapy.
3. <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/coping/mental-health-cancer/where-to-get-support/mental-health-support-organisations> - Cancer Research UK lists various mental health and well-being organizations that offer support to individuals affected by cancer. The article includes national and local organizations, such as Adferiad in Wales, Anxiety UK, CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably), and Mind, which provides advice and support for mental health problems. It also mentions specialized services like Breathing Space in Scotland, a confidential helpline for those feeling low, anxious, or depressed. The article emphasizes the importance of seeking support and provides contact details for each organization to assist individuals in finding appropriate help.
4. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31706438/> - This study examines the long-term psychological distress in breast cancer survivors compared to matched controls. The research found that a higher proportion of breast cancer survivors experienced symptoms of depression (10.6%) and anxiety (18.6%) compared to controls (4.9% and 16.3%, respectively). The odds of severe depression and anxiety symptoms were significantly higher in survivors, even after adjusting for history of depression or antidepressant use. The study concludes that breast cancer survivors have an increased risk of severe depression and anxiety symptoms compared to controls, persisting for at least 10 years after diagnosis.
5. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/25998574/> - This systematic review assesses the prevalence of long-term symptoms of depression and anxiety in breast cancer survivors. The study found that the prevalence of depression symptoms ranged from 9.4% to 66.1%, and anxiety symptoms from 17.9% to 33.3%. The review suggests an increased risk of depression symptoms in survivors one year after diagnosis, with a decrease over subsequent years. However, symptoms of anxiety were not more prevalent among women with early-stage breast cancer. The authors recommend that healthcare providers be aware of the higher prevalence of depression among survivors and consider this in their care plans.
6. <https://ascopubs.org/doi/10.1200/JCO.2019.37.15_suppl.1564> - This population-based cohort study in the United Kingdom investigates the risk of anxiety and depression in breast cancer survivors compared to women without a cancer history. The study found that breast cancer survivors had a significantly higher risk of both anxiety and depression diagnosed in primary care for three years following diagnosis. The incidence rates were 0.08 per 1,000 person-years for anxiety and 70 per 1,000 person-years for depression. The study concludes that breast cancer survivors in the UK had a significantly higher risk of anxiety and depression compared to women who never had cancer, particularly in the first three years post-diagnosis.
7. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33411711/> - This matched population-based cohort study in the United Kingdom examines associations between breast cancer survivorship and adverse mental health outcomes. The study found that compared to women without prior cancer, breast cancer survivors had higher risks of anxiety, depression, sleep problems, sexual dysfunction, fatigue, and pain. These elevated risks persisted for at least 5-10 years after diagnosis. The study highlights the importance of early diagnosis and increased awareness among patients, healthcare professionals, and policymakers to mitigate the impacts of these raised risks on survivors' mental health.