# Advancing integrated mental health support in cancer care to address systemic disparities



Cancer treatment is often a delicate balancing act, particularly when complicated by concurrent mental health issues. A poignant account from a cancer specialist highlights the struggle of managing a patient in her 60s who faced not one but two life-threatening cancers alongside long-term depression. The doctor’s advice to the patient—to avoid surgery that could compromise treatment for her second cancer—was clinically sound but ultimately shadowed by a more profound challenge: the patient’s fragile mental health and the inadequacies of mental healthcare provision.

While cancer care typically benefits from substantial government funding, philanthropic efforts, and robust support networks involving multidisciplinary teams, the same cannot be said for mental illness. Despite growing awareness and increased funding, mental health services remain fragmented and difficult to access, especially for those with dual diagnoses. The doctor’s patient, good in physical care conditions but poorly supported in her mental health needs, illustrates an all-too-common disparity where physical health is treated lavishly, and mental health is frequently neglected.

This gap has real consequences. After a thorough consultation intended to optimize her cancer treatment plan, the patient was overwhelmed, promptly cancelling all appointments—a decision that deeply distressed her oncologist, who feared an avoidable health crisis. The doctor’s reflections underscore the cognitive overload placed on patients and hint at the systemic failure to integrate mental health into cancer care properly. The patient’s distress was less about the clinical recommendations and more about the mental health support system’s shortcomings in addressing her vulnerability.

Cancer care centres worldwide are increasingly recognising this dual burden. Institutions like Massachusetts General Hospital have pioneered collaborative care programs focusing on individuals with cancer and mental illness. These programs promote a team-based, person-centred approach designed to prevent premature mortality and improve quality of life through clinical innovation and community engagement. Similarly, NYU Langone’s Perlmutter Cancer Center offers comprehensive supportive care integrating oncologists with mental health professionals, aiming to ease the emotional and physical strains during cancer treatment through both in-person and virtual services.

Access remains a critical issue, but advances in digital health offer new avenues for support. The American Cancer Society highlights the value of online mental health services for cancer patients, especially those with mobility challenges or those living in underserved areas. These platforms reduce travel burdens and improve access while providing flexibility—a vital component for patients juggling complex schedules and health issues.

Beyond direct medical interventions, holistic cancer care models include varied support services. Facilities like El Camino Health integrate complementary therapies—such as restorative yoga and breathwork—with mental health support from social workers and psychologists, fostering a well-rounded approach to patient wellbeing. Dana-Farber Cancer Institute offers survivors spiritual counseling and genetic counseling alongside long-term follow-up care designed to address the ongoing emotional and physical challenges post-treatment.

The narrative from the oncologist’s experience advocates strongly for embedding mental health professionals—such as counsellors or psychologists—within cancer care teams. This integration would ensure mental health needs are addressed timely and concurrently with cancer treatment, reducing patient overwhelm and potentially improving adherence to vital therapy schedules. With mental illness prevalent and interwoven with cancer’s complexities, the case for such an approach is compelling, promising better outcomes for some of the most vulnerable patients.

Ultimately, the account reveals a critical gap in healthcare: the parallel, yet often disjointed, treatment of cancer and mental illness. It calls for healthcare systems to innovate and adapt, ensuring that addressing mental health is not a secondary consideration but an integrated element of comprehensive cancer care.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/oct/08/cancer-treatment-mental-health-helped-patient-then-devastating-text)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/oct/08/cancer-treatment-mental-health-helped-patient-then-devastating-text)
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* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://www.massgeneral.org/cancer-center/patient-and-family-resources/supportive-care/collaborative-care-and-community-engagement)
* Paragraph 5 – [[6]](https://nyulangone.org/locations/perlmutter-cancer-center/cancer-support-services/supportive-care-at-perlmutter-cancer-center), [[2]](https://www.cancer.org/cancer/latest-news/online-mental-health-support-for-people-with-cancer.html)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://www.elcaminohealth.org/services/cancer-care/for-patients-zh), [[5]](https://www.dana-farber.org/patient-family/survivors/support)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/oct/08/cancer-treatment-mental-health-helped-patient-then-devastating-text), [[4]](https://www.massgeneral.org/cancer-center/patient-and-family-resources/supportive-care/collaborative-care-and-community-engagement)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/oct/08/cancer-treatment-mental-health-helped-patient-then-devastating-text> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/latest-news/online-mental-health-support-for-people-with-cancer.html> - The American Cancer Society discusses the importance of online mental health support for cancer patients, highlighting that many individuals with cancer experience anxiety, depression, and distress. Online therapy offers a convenient and flexible option, especially for those facing physical limitations or living in underserved areas. The article emphasizes the benefits of online therapy, including reduced travel burdens and increased accessibility, and encourages patients to discuss mental health concerns with their healthcare providers.
3. <https://www.elcaminohealth.org/services/cancer-care/for-patients-zh> - El Camino Health provides comprehensive support services for cancer patients, including integrative oncology services such as breathwork, restorative yoga, and mental health support from social workers and psychologists. They also offer support groups, health library resources, and assistance with planning cancer care, addressing aspects like billing, care coordination, and advance healthcare directives, ensuring holistic care for patients and their families.
4. <https://www.massgeneral.org/cancer-center/patient-and-family-resources/supportive-care/collaborative-care-and-community-engagement> - Massachusetts General Hospital's Collaborative Care and Community Engagement Program aims to improve access to cancer care for patients with mental illness. The program focuses on clinical innovation, research, education, and advocacy to prevent premature cancer mortality and enhance the quality of life for individuals affected by both cancer and mental health issues, promoting a person-centered, team-based approach to care.
5. <https://www.dana-farber.org/patient-family/survivors/support> - Dana-Farber Cancer Institute offers a range of support services for cancer survivors, including spiritual counseling, genetic counseling, and long-term follow-up clinics. These services are designed to assist patients in managing the physical and emotional challenges of survivorship, ensuring comprehensive care that addresses both medical and psychosocial needs.
6. <https://nyulangone.org/locations/perlmutter-cancer-center/cancer-support-services/supportive-care-at-perlmutter-cancer-center> - NYU Langone Health's Perlmutter Cancer Center provides supportive care services that include a team of oncologists, integrative health professionals, nurses, nutritionists, palliative care physicians, and social workers. These services aim to assist patients and their families during treatment, offering both in-person and virtual appointments to accommodate diverse needs.
7. <https://www.massgeneral.org/cancer-center/patient-and-family-resources/supportive-care> - Massachusetts General Hospital offers a variety of education and support resources to help patients and their families throughout the cancer experience. These include wellness programs, workshops, support groups, and patient materials, all designed to address the physical and emotional demands of serious illness, ensuring comprehensive care for patients and their families.