

Link between PTSD and cancer

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder among cancer patients can affect treatment outcome, writes **Kasmiah Mustapha**

WE often hear about cancer patients who refuse treatment. Some even stop treatment after a few sessions.

We also read about those who believe in alternative treatments rather than conventional ones. The reason given is that they hate the pain or severe side effects of their treatment. They say alternative treatments are better because chemotherapy also kills healthy cells.

As many of us don't have any idea what it's like to face cancer, we are quick to think that these patients are making excuses because they are in denial about their disease.

But what we are unaware of is that cancer patients suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). They have intrusive thoughts related to flashbacks of their diagnosis and treatment and fear of disease recurrence, which leads them to decline or default on their treatment.

PTSD is often associated with people who have experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event such as war, a natural disaster, an accident or sexual assault.

But cancer can be equally traumatic for some patients, because it brings fear — fear of pain and dying. When they are in constant fear, their thoughts and feelings are affected.

PTSD is a psychological distress for cancer patients when they are dealing with a traumatic illness.

The link between PTSD and cancer was recently revealed in a study by researchers from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) led by Caryn Chan Mei Hsien.

In the four-year study, it was found that one in five cancer patients developed PTSD within six months of their diagnosis. Four years later, one in three developed chronic PTSD.

The study, which began in 2011, followed 469 patients at Universiti Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) with various cancers in various stages.

Cancer is a traumatic illness.
PICTURE FROM MEDICALDAILY.COM



CHANGES IN THINKING AND MOOD

POST-TRAUMATIC Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that is triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.

Symptoms may start within one month of the traumatic event but sometimes they may not appear until years after the event. These symptoms cause significant problems in social or work situations and in relationships. They can also interfere with your ability to go about your normal daily tasks.

PTSD symptoms are generally grouped into four types: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions.

Symptoms can vary over time or vary from person to person.

• Intrusive memories

- Recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks)
- Upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event
- Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the traumatic event

• Avoidance

- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Avoiding places, activities or people that

remind you of the traumatic event

• Negative changes in thinking and mood

- Negative thoughts about yourself, other people or the world
- Hopelessness about the future
- Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event
- Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- Feeling detached from family and friends
- Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- Feeling emotionally numb

• Changes in physical and emotional reactions

- Being easily startled or frightened

- Always being on guard for danger
- Self-destructive behaviour, such as drinking too much or driving too fast
- Trouble sleeping and concentrating
- Irritability, angry outbursts or aggressive behaviour

When to see a doctor

If you have disturbing thoughts and feelings about a traumatic event for more than a month, if they're severe, or if you feel you're having trouble getting your life back under control, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. Getting treatment as soon as possible can help prevent PTSD symptoms from getting worse.

Source: Mayo Clinic