#HEALTH & FITNESS

How cancer counselling helps you navigate treatment and rebuild confidence

Facing a life-changing diagnosis involves far more than medical appointments and prescriptions. From handling treatment burnout to easing difficult family conversations, working with a therapist provides essential tools to navigate the emotional side of recovery.



Most of us picture counselling sessions as a chair, a box of tissues and an hour of talking about chronic depression. And for someone fighting cancer, that picture can be the very first thing that keeps them from walking through the door.

The reality, however, is broader. A psychologist or counsellor is not there only to hear about your feelings of distress, but also to help you manage the many challenges that come with a diagnosis, including fear, treatment-related stress, changes in your body, difficult conversations at home, questions about work, and a future that suddenly feels uncertain.

The first thing many patients meet, though, is not sadness but disbelief.

Abdul Hamid, who is a prominent psychotherapist at the Monobikash Foundation, says, "The most common reactions after a diagnosis are non-acceptance and denial. 'This can't be happening to me' is a way of protecting oneself from something too large to take in at once."



That is why a psychologist primarily assists cancer patients in coming to terms with their diagnosis and gradually accepting the changes it brings to their lives. Hamid clarifies that encouraging patients to "stay positive all the time" is not how counselling sessions work. It is more about creating a safe space for them to express their fears, frustrations, and uncertainties without judgment.

Through emotional support, realistic reassurance, and positive encouragement, they assist patients in recognising their strengths, acknowledging their efforts, and rebuilding their confidence in their ability to navigate the journey ahead.

Even small affirmations such as acknowledging their courage in attending treatment or their determination to keep going despite challenging days can strengthen their sense of self-worth and agency.

The goal is not to deny the reality of the illness but to empower patients to confront it with greater emotional resilience, hope, and confidence. In Hamid's experience, individuals who are psychologically and mentally strong tend to respond better to medication.

In practice, most psychologists begin by simply listening. They want to know what has happened, what worries you most, and what support you currently have in place. You do not have to share your entire story all at once, nor do you need to have the "right" words to express yourself. And over the course of several sessions, the conversation typically shifts to specific issues and how to address them.

Along the way, many patients arrive carrying fears and uncertainties: fear of pain, treatment, and the unknown. Hamid says a counsellor helps identify these fears so they no longer operate in the dark. Treatment itself can often be a source of stress. Side effects, waiting for scan results, making difficult decisions, and the exhaustion that comes with hospital routines can wear a person down, even when the treatment is progressing well.

The body's changes bring their own struggles. "The physical changes may lead individuals to feel self-conscious, prompting them to avoid social interactions," Hamid mentions. "In such cases, counselling can be beneficial in helping to rebuild confidence and comfort in being seen by others."

Hamid mentions how relationships change too, as partners take on caregiving roles, intimacy shifts, and some friendships fade. Returning to work after treatment raises further questions about energy, disclosure, and how colleagues will react. These changes are worth discussing rather than keeping silent.

Throughout, counselling is not only about talking. Practical tools, such as ways to manage anxious thoughts, coping with negative rumination, and ways to pace daily life, are part of the work.

Ultimately, a psychologist cannot change a diagnosis. However, they can provide a supportive, non-judgmental environment and assistance in initiating difficult conversations. While medicine addresses the illness, counselling supports the individual experiencing it.

By K T Humaira
Photo: Collected



Knowing your normal: Breast Health Hub

For many women, questions about their breasts begin early. What does a lump mean? If breast cancer runs in the family, should one be worried? These are among the questions Monoshita Ayruani, founder of a lingerie brand, says her team has repeatedly heard during private bra fittings. Those conversations led to the launch of the SHAPE Breast Health Hub, a free online resource designed to help women understand what is normal for their bodies and recognise changes that may need medical attention.

Launched on October 7 during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the Hub is available in Bangla and English.

A SIMPLE HABIT: LOOK, FEEL, NOTICE

At the centre of the Hub is a monthly awareness habit: Look, Feel, Notice. It encourages women to become familiar with how their breasts normally look and feel so they can recognise changes. The Hub explains which changes should be discussed with a healthcare professional and provides information on seeking care in Bangladesh, including at public hospitals and private clinics.

Users can set monthly reminders through their calendars or WhatsApp. The Hub is an awareness resource, not a medical tool.

"It is not a diagnosis. It is not screening, and it says so clearly: knowing your normal does not replace the screening a doctor recommends for your age and history," Ayruani explains.

The Hub also states that it does not save or send information users enter or tick on the page.

AWARENESS, NOT DIAGNOSIS

The Hub's Signs section covers eight changes, including new lumps, changes in breast size or shape, skin dimpling, nipple inversion or discharge, redness, warmth and persistent localised pain. It explains what these changes can mean and advises users to seek professional assessment for new or persistent changes.

The platform does not assign numerical risk scores or categorise users as low or high risk.

"The boundary is this: the Hub will never give a woman a score, a tier or a 'low risk' label," Ayruani says. "A short quiz cannot know anyone's risk, and a reassuring label from a bra company could delay real care."

BUILDING THE INFORMATION RESPONSIBLY

The Hub lists sources for its figures and clinical information, drawing on public education materials from relevant organisations. It distinguishes US-based figures from information applicable to Bangladesh.

Before launch, two practising doctors reviewed the content. Their feedback led to revisions concerning the awareness habit, survival statistics, care navigation and privacy.

TAKING THE MESSAGE BEYOND THE WEBSITE

The Hub will remain available throughout the year. Over the following two weeks, the brand plans to promote it through posters in hospitals and clinics across Bangladesh.

"I want 'know your normal' to become an ordinary phrase among Bangladeshi women, as ordinary as asking your bra size," Ayruani says. She hopes women who notice changes will seek medical advice without panic or shame.

By Farhana Faiza
For details on the breast health hub, visit: https://shapelingerie.com/pages/breast-health-hub