

# CANCER AND THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE



## WHAT DOES A CANCER DIAGNOSIS HAVE TO DO WITH HIGH SCHOOL? A Few Different Areas...

- High school students who are diagnosed with cancer may face obstacles related to academics and learning difficulties due to:
- Side effects of intensive treatments<sup>1</sup>
- Gaps in instruction<sup>1</sup>
- Symptoms of their diagnosis<sup>1</sup>

## HOW WILL THIS AFFECT THE HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT? Mental Health Considerations...

- Difficulties may arise pertaining to:
- Body Image<sup>2</sup>
- Social connections with peers<sup>2</sup>
- Identity<sup>2</sup>
- Romantic and Intimacy Concerns<sup>2</sup>
- School Disconnection<sup>2</sup>

## HOW CAN I HELP Educators Role...

- High school students diagnosed with cancer may hold the belief that they will not be able to succeed once they return to school, and this may delay their success<sup>3</sup>.
- As educators, you have the chance to support student success and provide high school students with the confidence that they will succeed despite their diagnosis.

## WILL THE HIGH-SCHOOL STUDENT GRADUATE ON TIME? Graduation Timeline Concerns...

- High school students diagnosed with cancer and those who do not have similar graduation rates<sup>4</sup>.
- The graduation timeline should be considered, but not a primary concern<sup>4</sup>.
- High school students with a cancer diagnosis may benefit from an IEP or 504 plan<sup>4</sup>.
- Academic progress should be continuously monitored by teachers and guidance counselors so that accommodations, and if necessary, modifications can be put in place<sup>4</sup>.

## WHAT DO ACCOMMODATIONS LOOK LIKE?

- Accommodations should pertain to the individual high school student, but some guidelines can be:
- Flexible deadlines
  - Materials accessible at home through Virtual Classroom
  - Guided notes
  - Copies of student notes
  - Access to breaks in the nurses' office for medication and rest
  - In-school counseling check-ins
  - Private space to eat lunch with peers

## WHAT SHOULD I LOOK OUT FOR? Mental Health Symptoms

- High school students diagnosed with cancer may experience changes in their mental health, such as the onset of depressive symptoms<sup>5</sup>.
- However, high school students fighting cancer may try to mask and ignore their depressive symptoms more often than their same-aged peers<sup>5</sup>.
- Withdrawal from peers, changes in how talkative a student is, a saddened physical presentation, irritability, and tearfulness may all be signs of mental health concerns.
- The Child Study Team and Guidance team are all available to check in with the student and provide counseling services.
- Alerting faculty who can provide support may allow the student to process and hold space during a time when it is needed.

## DECISION MAKING Student Autonomy

- As adolescence is a time to develop a sense of independence, teenagers fighting cancer may not feel this sense of independence<sup>6</sup>.
  - High school students' medical challenges dictate a large part of their schedule<sup>6</sup>.
- As they know themselves well, reach out to the student directly with any questions you may have, so that they can make their own decisions<sup>6</sup>.
- Include the high school student in the 504 and IEP development process by:
  - Having the high school student present at meetings, either virtually or in-person
  - Asking them for ideas of supports
  - Providing support recommendations and asking for their opinion on whether it would benefit them.

# SCHOOL EVENTS MADE

## ACCESSIBLE

Here are some ideas to keep in mind regarding making student events accessible to all students!



### Access to masks at large, enclosed, social events

Students who are undergoing treatment for cancer may experience being immunocompromised, as many cancer treatments cause a decrease in fighting off germs and illness<sup>7</sup>. Having access to masks for high school students and their friends to wear may reduce stigma and promote accessibility.

### Allow the student to leave class early prior to transitions

Transitioning back into the school day routine may be overwhelming for the student and provoke worries about getting sick from other students in crowded hallways. Allowing the student to leave class with a peer 5 minutes early may reduce nervousness about crowded transitions between classes and help the student to decompress in between classes.

### Live-Streams via Zoom for those who cannot attend

Students may not feel well after treatments or as a result of their diagnosis and thus may be unable to attend the regularly scheduled school day. The student may miss assemblies and events during the school day that they may enjoy. Providing a livestream of these events may allow the high school student to feel connected to the school and the event.

### If the student cannot attend, providing the student with any prizes or gifts received at the event

High school students may receive free apparel, prizes, and rewards at school events. To ensure the student does not feel excluded or penalized, acquire these giveaways for them.

### Provide information from college/career fairs that are handed out

High school students who are undergoing cancer treatment may not be able to attend college and career fairs. This could cause stress of delaying their next phase of life. To minimize stress, provide high school students with copies of all informational flyers distributed at the event, and ask any representatives from the institutions whether they are willing to meet by phone with the student, so they still have the chance to have their questions answered and be informed.

## HELPFUL SITES

- <https://www.cancer.gov/types/aya>
  - [Info about specific issues Teens with cancer may face, and specific info about illness symptoms and experiences](#)
- <https://www.cancer.org/cancer/types/cancer-in-adolescents.html>
  - [Special considerations for the daily life and cancer experience of teens with cancer](#)
- <https://med.stanford.edu/stanmed/2020issue1/meeting-specific-needs-teens-young-adults-cancer>
  - [Helping maintain adolescence through a cancer diagnosis and treatment](#)

# REFERENCES

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