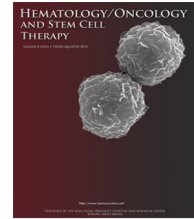




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Damocles' syndrome revisited: Update on the fear of cancer recurrence in the complex world of today's treatments and survivorship

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Fear of recurrence;
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Abstract

Objective/Background: Improvements in curative treatments for many types of cancer have emerged over the past several decades, resulting in a growing population of long-term cancer survivors – of both adult and childhood cancers. Despite this incredible medical achievement, long-term survivors of cancer face a unique fear: the fear of relapse.

Methods: We conducted a review of the literature for data on fear of relapse among cancer survivors.

Results: The fear of cancer recurrence is present in survivors of childhood and adult cancers as well as family members and often leads to psychological sequelae.

Conclusion: Literature on the fear of cancer recurrence has begun to emerge. However, herein we provide a unique approach through the use of a metaphor: Cicero's story of Damocles' sword. We aim to outline the many fear-related and emotional challenges faced by cancer survivors with an extensive review of studies demonstrating such challenges.

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56 Introduction

57 The Roman philosopher Cicero wrote about Dionysus, the
 58 tyrant king of Syracuse. In one story, the courtier Damocles
 59 expresses his belief that Dionysus is the most fortunate man
 60 in the world. Wishing to teach him a lesson, Dionysus allows
 61 Damocles to sit on his throne, giving him all of his riches. In
 62 the midst of Damocles’ enjoyment, Dionysus suspends a
 63 sword over Damocles’ neck, dangling by a single horsehair.
 64 Preoccupied with the danger of the sword, Damocles is no
 65 longer able to enjoy the beauty around him. No longer wish-
 66 ing to be so fortunate, he begs Dionysus to take back his
 67 throne.

68 For Damocles, great fortune was not worth the unrelent-
 69 ing fear that accompanied it. Damocles’ outlook is shared
 70 today by many, particularly survivors of childhood or adult
 71 cancers. The “mixed blessings” consequences faced by sur-
 72 vivors of childhood cancer were first described using the
 73 story of “Damocles’ Sword” as an analogy in the early
 74 1980s [1]. Survivors are given a new lease on life, but also
 75 persisting fears of recurrence, subsequent malignancies,

and long-term health sequelae after cancer treatment. 76
 The cancer survivor experiences hope and celebration as 77
 well as uncertainty, fear, and hypervigilance to new symp- 78
 toms [2]. New cancer treatments and increasing recommen- 79
 dations for watchful waiting in lieu of active treatment 80
 leave even more survivors with Damocles’ view of their 81
 futures (Fig. 1). 82

Childhood cancer survivors 83

Awareness of this phenomenon-what we call the 84
 “Damocles’ sword effect” (DSE)-is pertinent due to an 85
 increasing number of survivors previously treated for child- 86
 hood and adolescent cancer. According to a 2014 report [3], 87
 the overall survival rate for all childhood and adolescent 88
 cancers is nearly 85%. It is now both possible and imperative 89
 to focus on quality of life (QoL) among these survivors. In 90
 1998, the American Cancer Society Task Force on Children 91
 and Cancer reported, “the progress achieved in attaining 92
 80% survival among children and adolescents and young 93
 adults with cancer can be justified *only* if their physical, 94

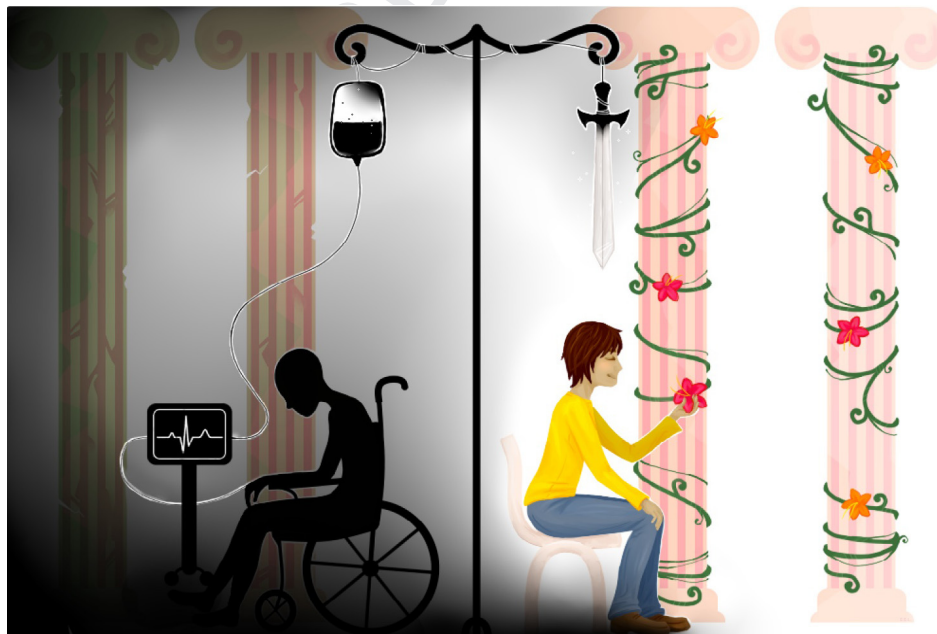


Fig. 1 An artistic depiction of a cancer survivor who lives in the constant shadow of a previous cancer diagnosis.

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