

JewishStandard

The distress and uncertainty of cancer and tips for coping

With close to 1.5 million new cancer cases developing this year, health-care clinicians are becoming increasingly aware of common distress levels in patients often caused by diagnosis and or treatment. Failure to recognize and treat distress leads to difficulty making treatment decisions, adhering to those decisions when made, and frequent office and emergency room visits, which placed greater burden on the oncology team.

Because distress symptoms do not go away on their own, mental health professionals like Dr. Michele Preminger, a board certified psychiatrist specializing in women's emotional health at The Rocking Chair in Englewood, are expressing the importance of addressing and de-stigmatizing both cancer and psychological diagnoses.

"It's hard for cancer patients to voice their fears and anxiety and depressive symptoms because they are trying to stay strong for their family and friends," she said. "They often mask their symptoms with their medical

care team because they do not want to appear weak or not trying their best.

"These patients often experience panic attacks or lose endless nights of sleep worrying about the 'what ifs,'" said Preminger.

According to the NCCN Clinical Practice Guidelines, recent surveys have found that 20 percent to 40 percent of newly diagnosed and recurrent cancer patients show a significant level of distress while less than 10 percent of patients are actually identified and referred for psychological help.

Among those who have the most difficulty addressing their needs, Preminger said, are women who view their roles as caregivers or the backbone of the family unit.

"Women, by nature, have a tendency to put themselves last on the priority list," she said. "At this very difficult time in a woman's life, she needs to know that it's crucial to address her emotional needs in order to optimize her treatment and healing."

"Treating patients with a holistic approach is most helpful when coping with emotional stress and minimizes the need for additional medication," Preminger continued.

The Rocking Chair offers a multi-disciplinary approach to wellness and offers the following five treatment options in addition to psychiatric and psychological services:

- Yoga — personal fitness to the patients level of capability;
- Creative Arts Therapy — using arts, including writing exercises, for expression;
- Reflexology — a non-invasive method for stress and pain management;
- Group counseling — universalizing experience and source of encouragement; and
- Caregiver support — relieving the "burden" patients feel they place on others.

By explaining how health-care professionals used to handle emotional health, Preminger believes the old rules no longer apply.