

Engaging young breast cancer survivors



Young breast cancer survivors are generally considered those who were diagnosed with breast cancer before the age of 45.

These younger survivors typically have **different priorities and concerns post-treatment** than their older (peri- and post-menopausal) peers. They might have higher demands on both their time and emotional capacities than older survivors as they may be navigating post-treatment in addition to family formation, familial obligations (including children and/or aging family members), work and more. As such, they might be feeling overwhelmed and may not prioritize future post-treatment care.

However, the literature shows that this population typically wants to **connect with their fellow peers (other young survivors)** and that there are several promising avenues for encouraging this population to remain engaged in screenings.

Different priorities

Research shows that young breast cancer survivors often experience more uncertainty and concern related to quality of life, including sexual and reproductive health, financial insecurity and psychosocial factors than their older counterparts.

- **Fertility and sexual health:** Young survivors are often still of child-bearing age and may be concerned about fertility post-treatment. Additionally, young survivors can experience early-onset of menopausal symptoms, which can hamper their sex life, compounded by appearance concerns due to breast surgery.
- **Mental health:** Young survivors experience higher rates of depression and social isolation than their older counterparts and they might struggle to relate to their peers. Additionally, they might experience strained relationships with their friends, family, and romantic partners who might not understand their experiences and concerns.
- **Financial health:** Many young survivors may have had to take extended time off from work for treatment and/or have had to quit their job. Many may have concerns about their long-term financial security and earning potential.

Reaching young breast cancer survivors

Young breast cancer survivors often want to connect with fellow young survivors and several research studies have shown promising methods for reaching young survivors. Given that they might have different priorities than their older counterparts, programs and outreach should be tailored for different age groups.

In particular, post-treatment engagement efforts may reach younger survivors more effectively by offering multiple health services in conjunction with screening, such as sexual health and family planning services. Additionally, there may be value in combining cancer support groups with career networking opportunities. A great example of combining resources for survivors is MD Anderson's [**Adolescent and Young Adult Program**](#).

Other ideas supported by the research include:

- **Peer counselors** can relate to young survivors and build relationships that encourage engagement in care and screening.
- **Digital interventions** such as text messaging have proven to be particularly acceptable and useful for engaging young survivors in care and screening.
 - **Social media** is a useful tool for general promotion of resources, including screening.
 - **Text-messaging** can be used as a health promotion tool alongside personalized reminders (e.g. appointment time, reminder to schedule etc.) to increase care utilization.
 - **Online support groups** can provide a place where survivors can find others with similar experiences. However, they can also cause further isolation if no one responds to their concerns and can be sources of inadequate or misleading information. Be mindful of the quality of interaction on any given forum before referring survivors to an online support group.
- **Faith-based interventions:** Many young women, especially Black or African American, rely on their faith and might have a strong faith community. Those engaged in prevention should consider supporting existing cancer support ministries.



Messaging considerations for young breast cancer survivors

Research indicates that many young survivors do not get resources related to their priorities and concerns in a timely fashion. Therefore, community organizations should consider engaging health care providers and patients earlier in their breast cancer treatment to provide survivorship resources.

Additionally, younger survivors want both practical and emotional support, and they prefer more detailed and personalized messaging to better understand their options and post-treatment needs. When messaging younger survivors consider the following:

- Create tailored communication unique to their needs and concerns as young survivors.
- Ensure messages acknowledge demands on their time and attention as younger women.
- Consider narrative approaches, such as “[Bring Your Brave](#)”, which research has shown to be effective for young survivors, especially African American women.
- Ensure that messages are culturally appropriate to the audience.

Finally, pre-test messages and campaigns with your audience to ensure concerns and priorities are addressed. Gathering input from the intended audience prior to release will result in a more effective campaign.

THEAL is led in collaboration with more than **20 community organizations** united together to support this effort.

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