

“Cancer is part of a person’s life, but it should never become their entire identity.” That simple yet powerful observation from global cancer advocate **Carmen Monge-Montero** captures a growing recognition in oncology: treating cancer successfully requires more than surgery, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, or radiation. It also requires helping patients and families understand—and navigate—the profound psychological consequences of the disease.

For decades, oncology has been built on scientific innovation and clinical excellence. Yet alongside diagnosis and treatment, communication has emerged as an equally essential pillar of cancer care. Increasingly, experts argue that psycho-oncological education deserves to stand alongside them—not as an optional support service, but as a fundamental component of quality cancer care.

Psychoeducation equips patients and caregivers with the knowledge, skills, and emotional tools needed to understand their diagnosis, manage uncertainty, cope with distress, and actively participate in treatment decisions. In doing so, it transforms information into empowerment.

Understanding the Emotional Journey

Cancer affects far more than the body. It disrupts relationships, careers, identity, and future plans. Numerous studies have demonstrated that psychological distress is highly prevalent among people living with cancer, with nearly one in two patients experiencing clinically significant distress during their cancer journey. Distress is associated with poorer quality of life, reduced treatment adherence, and greater healthcare utilization.

For **Carmen Monge-Montero**, founder of *MANO Beyond Cancer*, psychoeducation is fundamentally a process of self-discovery.

“Many people with lived experience do not have access to professional psychological support. Learning about their own journey becomes a way of understanding what cancer means in their lives. Psychoeducation helps people recognize that every cancer experience is unique. What helps one person may not help another. Most importantly, it reminds people that cancer is only one part of who they are.”

That understanding, she argues, restores perspective at a time when diagnosis often overwhelms every aspect of daily life.

More than Information

For **Kayla Fulginiti**, LCSW, OSW-C, Senior Director at *Elephants and Tea*, psychoeducation goes beyond simply providing facts.

“Psychoeducation provides a vital opportunity to normalize emotional reactions, teach effective coping strategies, and reduce anxiety through understanding. By providing clear, compassionate information about the emotional and psychological impact of cancer, we help patients feel more equipped, less isolated, and better able to engage in their care.”

Knowledge itself can become therapeutic. By understanding common emotional responses and learning practical coping strategies, patients regain a sense of control during a period often characterized by uncertainty and helplessness.

A Critical Need for Adolescents and Young Adults

The importance of psychoeducation becomes particularly evident among adolescents and young adults (AYAs), whose cancer experience unfolds alongside major developmental milestones.

While building careers, relationships, independence, and personal identity, young people with cancer are simultaneously confronted with a life-changing diagnosis. These overlapping challenges place them at particularly high risk of emotional distress.

“AYAs are navigating identity development, independence, and peer relationships,” says Fulginiti. “Adding cancer to that process creates unique psychological needs. Integrating psychoeducation into routine cancer care helps address misinformation while supporting the emotional development of this population.”

Tailored educational interventions can help young patients understand not only their disease, but also the emotional changes that accompany treatment and survivorship.

Listening to Those Who Have Lived It

Despite growing recognition of psychosocial care, significant gaps remain.

Monge-Montero believes one of the greatest missed opportunities is failing to involve patients themselves in designing educational programs.

“Many initiatives work in isolation and do not communicate with others facing similar challenges. People with lived experience understand how priorities change throughout the cancer journey. Patient advocates can help ensure educational programs remain relevant, practical, and responsive.”

Her message reflects a broader shift toward co-designing healthcare services with patients rather than simply for them.

The Forgotten Patients: Caregivers

Cancer’s psychological impact extends well beyond the person diagnosed.

As healthcare increasingly shifts from hospitals into homes, family members and friends are expected to perform complex caregiving tasks, often with little preparation or formal support. Research consistently shows that caregivers experience high rates of anxiety, depression, burnout, and emotional exhaustion—sometimes exceeding the distress experienced by patients themselves.

“Empowering caregivers with education and emotional support strengthens their ability to care for their loved one while protecting their own well-being,” Fulginiti explains.

She argues that caregivers need dedicated opportunities to process feelings of guilt, fear, helplessness, and fatigue while learning practical communication skills, healthy boundaries, and self-care strategies.

Supporting caregivers ultimately benefits patients as well, improving the overall quality of cancer care.

Can Artificial Intelligence Help?

Digital health technologies and artificial intelligence are increasingly being explored as tools for patient education. AI-powered platforms can provide accessible information, explain medical terminology, answer common questions, and guide patients toward reliable educational resources at any time.

These technologies have the potential to expand access to psycho-oncological education, particularly where specialist psychological services remain scarce.

Yet both experts caution against viewing AI as a replacement for human connection.

"AI can provide information and educational resources. However, it cannot replace the value of hearing from someone with lived experience of cancer. A computer has never experienced cancer in the same way a person has. The human perspective, empathy, and understanding that come from lived experience remain irreplaceable."

AI may enhance psychoeducation—but compassion, understanding, and shared experience remain uniquely human.

Education as Supportive Care

Modern oncology has achieved remarkable advances in precision medicine and targeted therapies. Yet the success of treatment cannot be measured solely by survival statistics.

Helping patients understand what they are experiencing, preparing families for the challenges ahead, and equipping both with practical psychological tools are equally important components of comprehensive cancer care.

Psycho-oncological education does not eliminate fear or uncertainty. It gives people the knowledge to face them.

As cancer care continues to evolve, education should no longer be viewed as an optional supplement to treatment. It is an intervention in its own right—one that empowers patients, strengthens caregivers, reduces distress, and ultimately supports better outcomes throughout the cancer journey.

References

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Interviews

- **Carmen Monge-Montero**, Global Cancer Advocate, Researcher, and Founder of MANO Beyond Cancer
- **Kayla Fulginiti, LCSW, OSW-C**, Senior Director, *Elephants and Tea*

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