

# Oncology Nurses' Role in Promoting Patient Self-Advocacy

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Teaching patients with cancer the skill of self-advocacy shifts the focus of their cancer care onto what is important to them, leading to optimized patient-centered care. As oncology nurses, providing support to patients as they self-advocate to get their needs met fosters a collaborative relationship, creating an environment in which patients feel comfortable verbalizing their needs and concerns.

## AT A GLANCE

- Self-advocacy in cancer survivorship is a skill set that patients with cancer can develop to ensure that their cancer care trajectory is individualized to reflect their personal needs, priorities, and values.
- By equipping patients with cancer to advocate for what is most important to them, oncology nurses increase the likelihood that patients will be able to overcome the numerous challenges they face, resulting in truly patient-centered care.
- Oncology nurses can support and empower their patients to self-advocate for their needs by assisting them in determining what is most important to them, assessing their ability to advocate for themselves, building their self-advocacy strengths, providing assistance to patients who struggle to self-advocate, and encouraging ongoing self-advocacy throughout their cancer journeys.

## KEYWORDS

patient advocacy; decision-making; communication; patient-centered care

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Oncology nurses value patient-centered care and supporting patients with cancer in self-managing their disease and treatment. Unfortunately, patients with cancer often struggle to speak up for themselves, feeling uncertain about how to interject their concerns and priorities or fearing that doing so may negatively affect the care they receive or upset their relationship with their care team (Hagan & Medberry, 2016).

Oncology nurses can play an important role in supporting patients' self-advocacy. One self-management skill set—patient self-advocacy—enables patients with cancer to ensure that their values and priorities are recognized when encountering challenging situations during their illness trajectory (Thomas et al., 2020). In this article, the authors review the concept of self-advocacy and present a case study exemplifying how oncology nurses can support patients to enact this important skill set.

## Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy focuses on equipping patients with the skills necessary to overcome challenges they meet along their personal cancer journeys, with the goal of optimizing their cancer care so that it fundamentally addresses their needs, values, and priorities (Hagan et al., 2018). Self-advocacy involves identifying and defining personal preferences and cultivating a relationship with the cancer care team to ensure that the plan of care aligns with their preferences (Hagan & Donovan, 2013a). This includes the ability to discern between the risks and benefits of various decisions based on personal priorities. In contrast, patients with cancer who struggle to self-advocate may lack the ability to adeptly navigate the healthcare system, make personally meaningful decisions, or foster a spirit of collaboration with the cancer care team (Hagan & Donovan, 2013b).

## Importance for Patients With Cancer and Oncology Nurses

Self-advocacy skills are critical for patients with cancer because they face a myriad of challenges, including managing multiple physical and emotional side effects of treatment and navigating a complex healthcare system (Covvey et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2021). These challenges simultaneously require patients to self-advocate while also making self-advocacy difficult. These difficulties include reacting emotionally to information about their diagnosis or treatment, rendering them unable to retain what they hear or read; feeling ill-equipped to effectively communicate with their cancer care