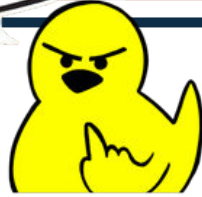


Presented by
stupidcancer®

CANCERCON

FOR ADOLESCENTS & YOUNG ADULTS



2026 BREAKOUT SESSION
SUMMARIES

KEY INSIGHTS AND TAKEAWAYS FOR AYAS

[CANCERCON.ORG](https://cancercon.org)

PROTECTING YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

SESSION SUMMARY

Experiencing mental health struggles is a completely normal response to an abnormal medical event. AYAs are absolutely not alone in this. By exploring basic neuroanatomy, attendees developed an understanding of how the body automatically reacts to the trauma of a diagnosis.

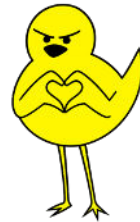
Cancer is a whole-body experience and healing requires a whole-body approach. Attendees practiced grounding exercises to regulate the nervous system back to a state of safety when anxiety or medical trauma triggers hit.

SPEAKERS:
ROBERT BENNETT, PHD, PPCNP-BC, CPNP-AC, PMHS AND PETER DRAHMS, RN

KEY TAKEAWAYS

You are not alone.

It is okay to give yourself space to feel how you feel.



(IN)FERTILITY AND FAMILY BUILDING

SESSION SUMMARY

Whether or not you're sure you want children, there are so many physical, emotional, and logistical pieces to building a family after an AYA cancer diagnosis. Sometimes, it can feel totally overwhelming. In this session, attendees were given a comprehensive overview of how cancer treatments impact both male and female fertility. Speakers detailed the medical preservation options available to AYA patients both before and after treatment, while offering practical tools to navigate the profound emotional complexities of the fertility journey.

SPEAKERS:
CHRISTOPHER CANN, MD AND REBECCA MORSE, LICSW, SIFI

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Cancer treatment can impact fertility, but it does not mean that becoming a parent is impossible.

Resources, grants, and insurance mandates exist to support AYAs with infertility.



SESSION SUMMARY

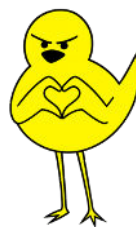
Caregivers are a foundational element of the AYA cancer community, yet they are often overlooked or not prioritized by others and by themselves. This workshop shed a spotlight on them: their stories, their challenges, and their essential role. This interactive session took an insightful look at caregiver experiences from the logistical, emotional, and financial sides; what meaningful support really looks like for AYA caregivers; and why honoring caregivers' contributions transforms the whole cancer experience.

SPEAKER:
HAYLEY BROWN
BUXTON-PUNCH

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Caregiving is hard work.

Caregivers deserve self-love and self-compassion.



CANCER IN THE BEDROOM: SEX AND INTIMACY

SESSION SUMMARY

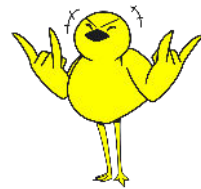
This session explored the intersection of cancer treatment, sexuality, intimacy, and relationships, emphasizing that sexual health is an essential component of overall human well-being throughout survivorship. Cancer impacts intimacy through a mix of physical changes, fatigue, anxiety, and shifts in desirability. Despite its importance, AYA patients frequently face systemic barriers to receiving guidance such as clinical discomfort, misconceptions about young adult sexuality, and caregiver presence, meaning vital topics like sexual function and gender identity are rarely addressed unless initiated by the patient. Practical strategies for patients and partners were explored, including consent scaffolding, practicing self-compassion, consulting sex therapists, and "redefining intimacy" away from rigid scripts toward low-pressure curiosity.

**SPEAKERS: ADAM
DUVALL, MD, MPH
AND SAMMY WINTESS,
LMFT-A**

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Cancer can change sexuality, body image, and relationships, but intimacy is adaptable.

Open communication, consent, self-compassion, and support meaningful reconnection.



THE FUN STUFF: INSURANCE, FINANCES, AND ADULTING

SESSION SUMMARY

This practical session demystified the financial and administrative challenges of navigating a cancer diagnosis, focusing on health insurance, medical billing, financial aid, and estate planning. The speaker provided a simple breakdown of essential insurance jargon like deductibles, copayments, and coinsurance, emphasizing that understanding a plan's out-of-pocket maximum is crucial for estimating annual medical expenses. Attendees were urged to look beyond low monthly premiums and evaluate a plan's total yearly cost, including provider networks and tiered prescription drug coverage. Meticulous record-keeping of claims, pre-authorizations, and medical expenses can significantly reduce financial stress.

SPEAKER:
LAURA BEILKE, ESQ

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Understanding your health insurance, carefully reviewing bills, and using the appeals process when something is denied can help you avoid unnecessary costs and self-advocate.



COMMUNITY DIALOGUES: SMALL-GROUP SESSIONS FOR AYAS

SESSION SUMMARIES

Connecting with other AYAs that have a similar background can be a profound experience. These intimate discussion sessions, each facilitated by a mental health professional, were an opportunity to speak openly with people who truly get it. To ensure safe spaces, each session was limited to members of the intended target population including LGBTQ+, BIPOC, Pediatric Survivors, Men, Caregivers, and those with Metastatic and Chronic Disease.

SESSIONS FACILITATED BY MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

KEY TAKEAWAY

Emotionally safe spaces for communities that are often marginalized, overlooked, and underrepresented is key for open conversation and compassion.



SESSION SUMMARY

While data informs policy, personal stories compel action by putting a human face on abstract statistics. The AYA narrative creates an urgent case for legislative reform that numbers alone cannot achieve. To maximize this impact, advocates must practice strategic communication and intentional wording adapted for the medium (i.e. social media, email, etc.). By working through a structured workbook, participants learned to shape their lived experiences into clear, impactful narrative arcs. Sharing these drafts in a collaborative space not only refined their individual voices but demonstrated how diverse personal histories can weave together into a powerful, unified call for systemic change.

SPEAKERS:
DILLON SPENCER,
KRISTINA GATELY,
MAGGIE ROGERS, AND
TOMICA SMITH

KEY TAKEAWAYS

You have a voice that deserves to be heard.

You have the power to create change.



A CREATIVE RESET FOR LOUD BRAINS

SESSION SUMMARY

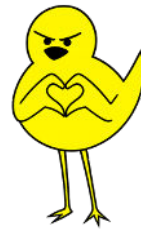
Using neurographic art, participants put perfection aside as they explored a calming, low-pressure creative space to slow racing thoughts, regulate the nervous system, and make space for breath. Art was used as a creative coping tool for stress relief and processing emotions, allowing folks to embrace imperfection and not make corrections. For this reason, participants began their art with a sharpie. Hands led, rather than brains, and the outcome was a unique watercolor painting.

SPEAKER:
AERIAL DONAVAN

KEY TAKEAWAYS

It's possible to feel joy and grief at the same time.

Being a survivor is hard work AND it's doable.



SESSION SUMMARY

This informational session explored how students facing a cancer diagnosis can effectively navigate higher education institutions to secure the resources necessary for their academic success. Through interactive activities, the facilitator shed light on the systemic challenges within academia. Federal protections like the ADA, FERPA, and HIPAA legally grant students the right to academic accommodations, which are best accessed by registering with the campus office of disability services. Students are not powerless if their initial requests are met with resistance - they have the right to advocate for themselves and seek accommodations.

SPEAKER:
NATALIA GREEN, PHD,
M.ED

KEY TAKEAWAYS

There are resources available to you that you can use.

You are a whole human beyond your Student ID or your MRN!



CANCER AND IDENTITY: IT'S COMPLICATED

SESSION SUMMARY

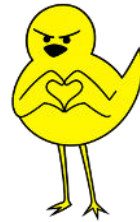
A cancer diagnosis interrupts life, making it difficult to plan and make commitments. It forces us to confront finitude and change our perspectives. During this writing workshop, attendees focused on the many identity shifts within an AYA cancer diagnosis and survivorship. Participants wrote about how cancer has impacted their identity, relationships, and independence, followed by small group discussions, allowing attendees to share lived experience together.

SPEAKER:
RYAN HART, PHD

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Meaning is not something we find once, it is constantly shifting.

Flourishing means we reconfigure, rather than restore.



ADJUSTING TO A CHANGING BODY

SESSION SUMMARY

This discussion session explored the shifting impact of cancer on body image and self-perception. An individual's relationship with their body is rarely static - it is a constantly evolving journey that often undergoes significant perspective shifts following a diagnosis. To help navigate this terrain, the session broke down three distinct concepts of body image: body positivity (loving your body exactly as it is), body neutrality (appreciate what your body can physically do rather than physical appearance), and body acceptance (appreciating your body for what it is in the present moment). Complicated body image feelings often predate a cancer diagnosis, and for some, the relationship with their body may not have fundamentally changed due to illness. There is absolutely no "right way" to feel about your body and every emotional response is entirely valid.

SPEAKER: LISA ORR

KEY TAKEAWAY

There is no right way to feel about your body - your feelings might change on a daily basis and that's ok!



THE DATING GAME: FINDING CONNECTIONS AFTER CANCER

SESSION SUMMARY

This practical session highlighted what it's like for AYAs to grapple with disclosure dilemmas, body dysmorphia, the importance of physical and emotional safety within relationships, and setting boundaries to set yourself up for success. In a large group, attendees discussed the challenges of disclosing cancer early in a relationship, with many often finding themselves waiting until later on to share information. Many attendees expressed that cancer has narrowed their dating pool and shared insecurities about how cancer has impacted them physically.

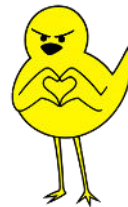
Most notably, people positively reinforced other attendees around concepts like disclosures, setting boundaries, and remaining positive through challenges with dating.

SPEAKER:
ISRAT AUDRY,
MSW, LCISW AND
ASHLEY MCLOUD,
MSW, LCISW

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Cancer undoubtedly impacts your dating life in many different ways.

It is important for people to understand themselves and their relationship with cancer in order to have a positive dating experience.



AYA 101: SETTING PROVIDERS UP FOR SUCCESS

SESSION SUMMARY

The presentation laid the foundation for successful tips providers can do, say, and know when treating AYAs. The speakers highlighted the uniqueness of AYA oncology, including disease biology, principles for caring for young patients, long term survival, research findings to best support clinical practice guidelines. A discussion with attendees focused on the challenges of how cancer programs can effectively reach, engage, and meet AYAs where they are in their journey. The speakers stressed that providers who are understanding, empathetic, and willing to tailor care plans to meet patients where they're at will ensure optimal adherence, outcomes, and quality of life among their patients.

SPEAKERS: JACOB STEIN, MD, MPH AND ANDREW SMITHERMAN, MD, MSC

KEY TAKEAWAYS

There is no one size fits all care plan when it comes to AYA patients.

Meeting AYAs where they're at leads to optimal adherence and success.



PEDIATRIC TO ADULT CARE: NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION

SESSION SUMMARY

The session focused on pediatric transition of care, sharing best practices for how to educate your providers about your needs and the importance of identifying providers with prior experience working with pediatric cancer survivors. In this panel-style session, the speakers also highlighted the challenges of transitioning from parental/caregiver support, as well as approaches that providers take to engage with pediatric cancer survivors. The speakers stressed the importance of advocating for yourself and ensuring that your social worker and primary care physician understand/help advocate for unique treatments you might need.

SPEAKERS: ERIC CHOW, MD, MPH, YOEL CLAROS-ORTIZ, ALAN PUGH, LICSW AND STEFANIE SACKNOFF, MS, PA-C

KEY TAKEAWAYS

While transitioning to adult care is challenging, AYAs will face many transitions in care throughout their lives.

It is important to educate yourself and your providers to ensure you receive the care that you need.



SUPER HUMAN OR HUMAN? STRESS, COMPASSION FATIGUE, AND VICARIOUS TRAUMA

SESSION SUMMARY

This session addressed the profound emotional weight professionals who support AYAs face, emphasizing that resilience does not mean ignoring stress or forcing toxic positivity. Instead, it is the ability to acknowledge trauma, adapt, and practice healthy coping mechanisms without losing yourself. The speaker explored burnout and compassion fatigue, clarifying that it is not a coping failure but a complex response that manifests physically, emotionally, and behaviorally—causing symptoms like chronic exhaustion, irritability, self-blame, and social withdrawal. Practical strategies rooted in boundary-setting and self-compassion were discussed, reminding attendees that establishing strong boundaries and seeking professional or informal support are not signs of weakness; they are protective, essential tools that make long-term caregiving, advocacy, and community work sustainable.

SPEAKER:
SARAH ROTHGEB,
MSW, LICSW

KEY TAKEAWAY

Resilience is not about pushing through everything, it is about recognizing stress, setting boundaries, accepting support, and caring for yourself so you can continue showing up for others.



NO TIME TO DECIDE: THE AYA FERTILITY PRESERVATION PRESSURE COOKER

SESSION SUMMARY

This session took an honest look at navigating fertility conversations with providers. The panel discussion shared first-person accounts of what it was like to be an AYA faced with a cancer diagnosis while navigating the nuances of fertility. There were fruitful conversations with the audience on how we can bring standardization to ensuring AYAs are being asked about fertility, agency when it comes to decision making and providing choice, and how to ensure these conversations are happening among providers and patients. The session ended with a Q&A on what additional insight the professionals felt they needed to go back to their cancer centers armed with the facts to push fertility conversations forward with decision makers.

SPEAKERS:
BETTY ROGGENKAMP,
MS, AMBREEN
MAAN, MSW, LSW &
EDWARD MISKIE

KEY TAKEAWAY

AYAs deserve clarity, compassion, and choice when it comes to fertility preservation options.

There is work to be done to ensure a standard of care is met when it comes to fertility preservation conversations.

