



# Supporting Partners and Spouses of Young Adult Cancer Patients

Program Overview, Implementation and Lessons learned

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June 2026



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# Agenda

- Why is this specific support needed?
- Group history
- Group format
- Examples of content
- Preliminary data
- Feedback (the good, the bad and the ugly!)
- Future directions



# Why is this specific support needed?

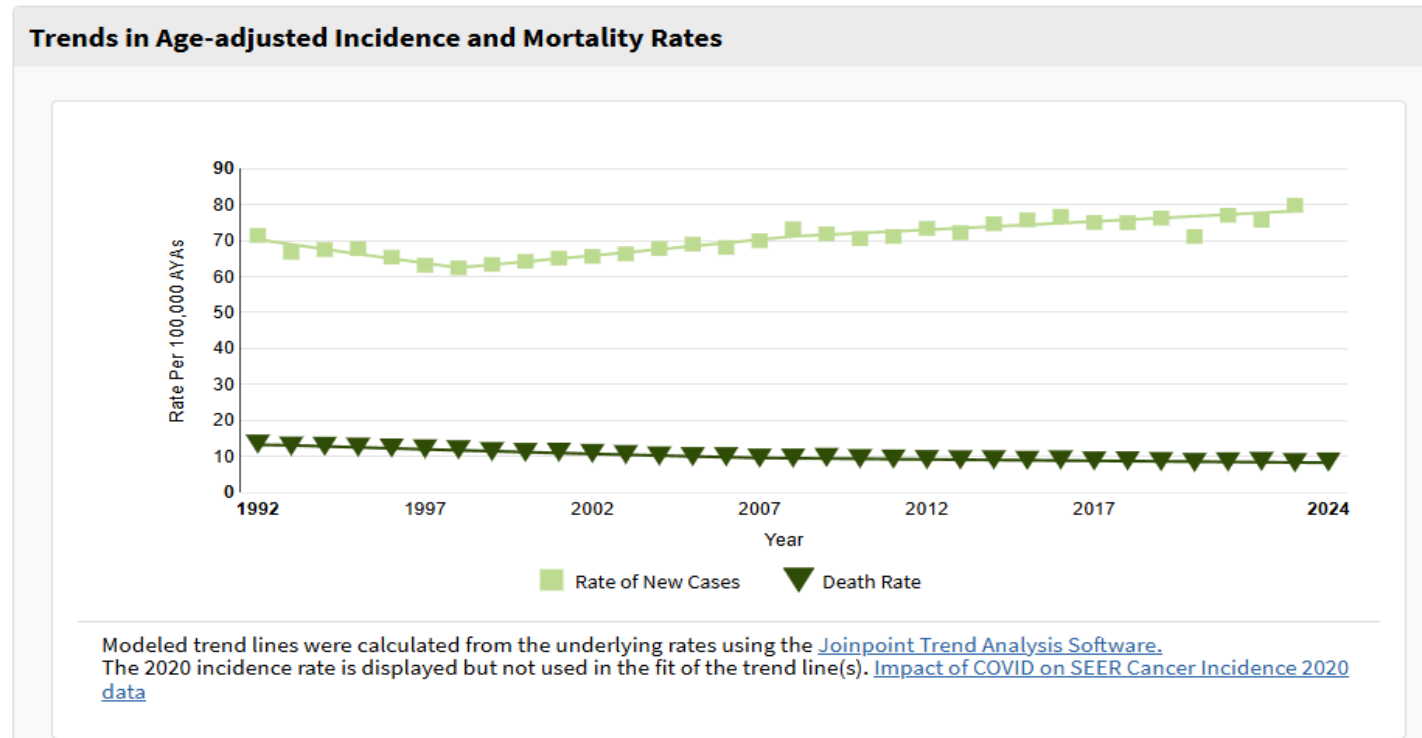


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# Young Adult Cancer on the Rise

- Cancer diagnoses are increasing in young adults (YAs)
  - Incidence of early-onset cancer (diagnosed <50 years) increased by 79.1% between 1990 and 2019 (Zhao et al., 2023)



National Cancer Institute SEER Data



## Why offer tailored support for partners?

- Partners/spouses often function as primary caregivers for Young Adult (YA) patients
- Partner/spouse distress is frequently higher than patients' distress
- Unmet needs impact coping, relationship functioning, decision making and sustainability of care

*(Braun 2007; Girgis 2013; Thompson 2021; Warner 2021)*



## Unique Needs Partners Caring Young Adults

- Competing responsibilities
- Financial toxicity (insurance etc.)
- Communication challenges
- Social isolation
- Relationship and intimacy disruption
- Parenting
- Family planning
- Consideration of premature death & legacy making



# How can we address these needs in our setting?

Staffing limitations

Limited direct access to caregivers

Consideration of existing supports



## Group History



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# Timeline





## Who's Eligible?

- Partner/spouse of YA patient in active treatment (age 22-49)
- Caring for a YA with any cancer type/ stage
- Caregiver completes:
  - Interest form
  - Intake
  - Pre-survey



## How is this Group Advertised?

- In clinic
- Virtually
  - Newsletters
  - Social media
- Referrals from staff
- **Word choice:** Partner/spouses of YAs don't identify with the word "caregiver," more a "support person" or simply "partner/spouse."

Are you a partner or spouse of a young adult with cancer?

### VIRTUAL PROGRAM FOR PARTNERS & SPOUSES CARING FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH CANCER

OPEN TO ANY PARTNER/SPOUSE OF YOUNG ADULT PATIENTS (~AGES 22-50) WHO ARE ON ACTIVE TREATMENT AT DANA-FARBER.

IT INCLUDES SEVEN 75-MINUTE ZOOM SESSIONS WEEKLY. THE NEXT GROUP WILL BEGIN IN JUNE 2026.

**SIGN UP TODAY!**



Topics of discussion may include:  
Changes in Roles and Relationships  
Living with Uncertainty  
Redefining Self-Care  
Building Support Systems  
Communication Strategies  
Coping with Challenging Emotions

Intake with a staff member is required before joining the group.

Questions? Email  
[vap@dfci.harvard.edu](mailto:vap@dfci.harvard.edu)



# Group Format



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## Format

Closed group

Weekly 75-minute  
sessions over 7-8 weeks

Each session is topic  
based

Virtual

Intake required

Pre and post survey



## Group Goals

- Share your experiences in a safe space where you feel **supported, validated** and **valued**.
- Gain new **information, tools** and **coping strategies** to help you navigate this experience.
- **Create community** and decrease feelings of isolation.



# Curriculum Overview

- Session 1: Changes in Roles and Relationships
- Session 2: Communication
- Session 3: Creating a “Coping with Uncertainty Toolbox”
  - Part 1: Values and Value Guided Action
- Session 4: Creating a “Coping with Uncertainty Toolbox”
  - Part 2: Professional Support, Problem Solving and Cognitive reframing
- Session 5: Caring for Yourself
- Session 6: Creating and Maintaining a Support System
- Session 7: Open Discussion
- Session 8 (optional): Parenting



## Group Content




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# Session Structure

 Recap from last session (5 mins)

 Check ins (20 mins)

 Topic and education (15 mins)

 Group Discussion (25 mins)

 Mindfulness Exercise and Close (10 mins)



## Intros and Check-ins

Your name

Where you're from

What you're comfortable sharing about your experience with your partner/spouse's cancer diagnosis and treatment (diagnosis, length of time, specific challenges etc.)

Favorite thing to do during a snow day



## Check-ins



Highs and lows since we last saw  
each other



One book, movie, show, or podcast  
you've listened to/watched that's  
brought joy



# Coping Toolbox

Professional counseling/  
psychopharmacology

Support groups

Problem-solving (for  
controllable aspects  
of stress)

Defining values and  
engaging in values-  
guided behaviors

Cognitive strategies  
(e.g., reframing  
thoughts)

Social outlets

Self-care (physical  
activity, sleep, eating  
well, etc.)

Self-compassion

Mindfulness



## The Storm (Living with a cancer diagnosis)

- A storm represents all the things that get in the way of living how you want to (anxiety, competing demands, sadness, fear, fatigue etc.) which can feel overpowering and unpredictable.
- It's easy to get caught up in avoiding the rocks and surviving the rough seas.



## Sources of Support

Tangible	Emotional	Informational
Transportation	Listening ear/shoulder to cry on	Sharing personal experience
Household tasks	Love	Advice
Meal prep/cooking	Validation	Knowledge
Financial assistance	Encouragement	Education
Childcare support	Intimacy	Decision-making support
Errands	Hope	Guidance

\*Different sources of support may be better at giving different types of help!



Other caregivers came up with these words/phrases for “self-care”

- **Returning to my breath**
- **Regeneration**
- **Space**
- **What your soul needs**
- **Sanity checks**
- **Grounding tools**
- **Finishing my coffee**
- **Rest**

# Debunking “self-care” myths

Doesn't need to be big

Can look different depending  
on need

Ripple effect

# Ritual Examples



COFFEE WITH  
SPECIFIC CREAMER



WASHING FACE AND  
BRUSHING TEETH  
ALONE



LISTENING TO A  
CHOSEN SONG OR  
PODCAST



CREATING DAILY "TO-  
DO" LIST



MEDITATION



# Different Modalities Mindfulness to Close

## Sprint Write

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Favorite place to relax

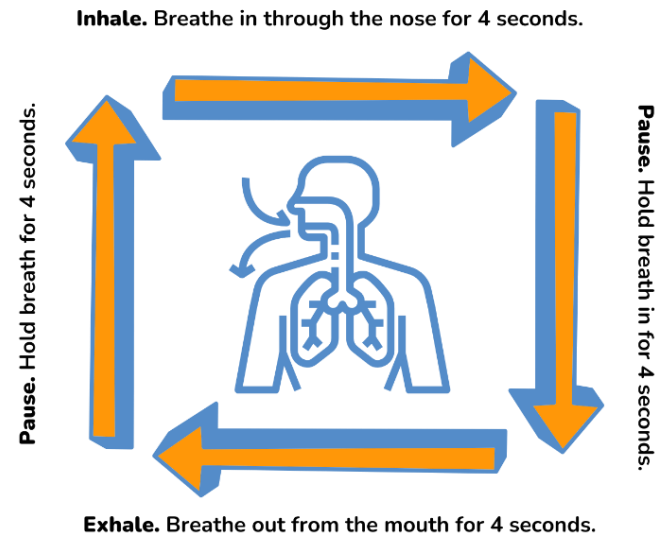
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A happy memory

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What matters most

## Box Breathing





## Group Data and Feedback



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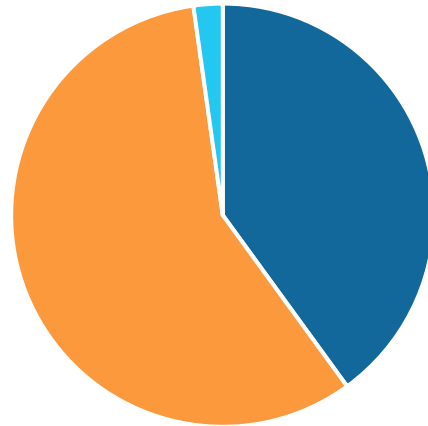


# Participant Data

- 8 Groups
- 88 participants
- Average of 11 participants per group
- **Participant mean age: 37 Median age: 36**
- **Patient mean age: 36 Median age: 36.5**

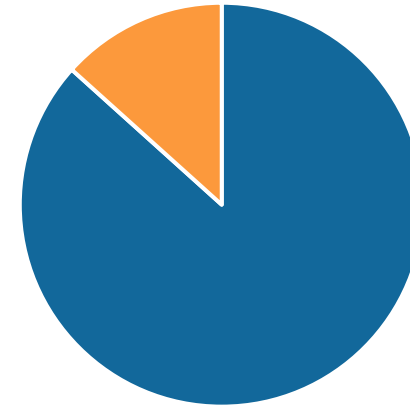
# Participant Data

Gender



■ 40 % Male ■ 58% Female ■ 2% Other

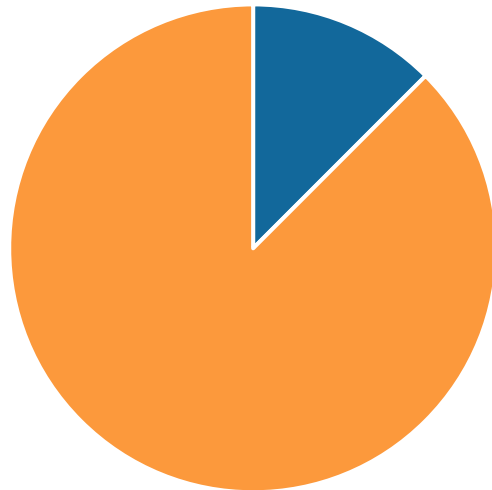
Married vs. Dating



■ 87% Married ■ 13% Dating

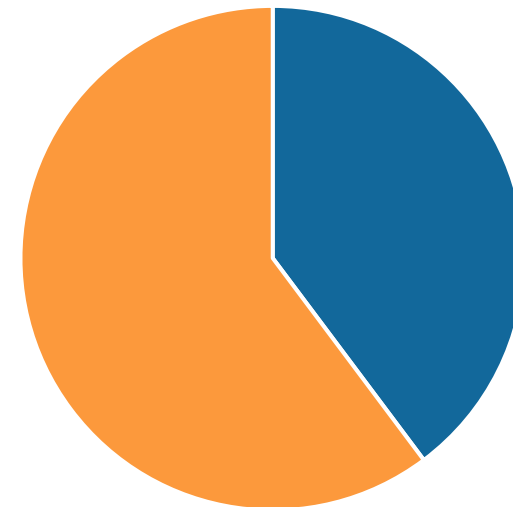
# Participant Data

## Employment Status



■ 12% Not Working    ■ 88% Working

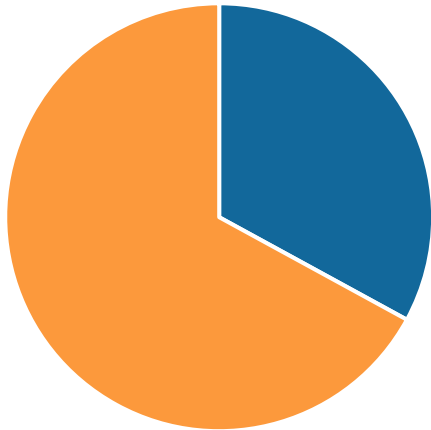
## Parent Status



■ 40% Are Not Parents    ■ 60% Are Parents

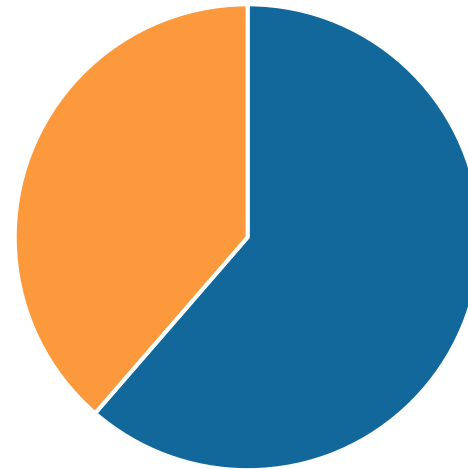
# Participant Data

Group Experience



■ 33% Has Group Experience ■ 67% First Group

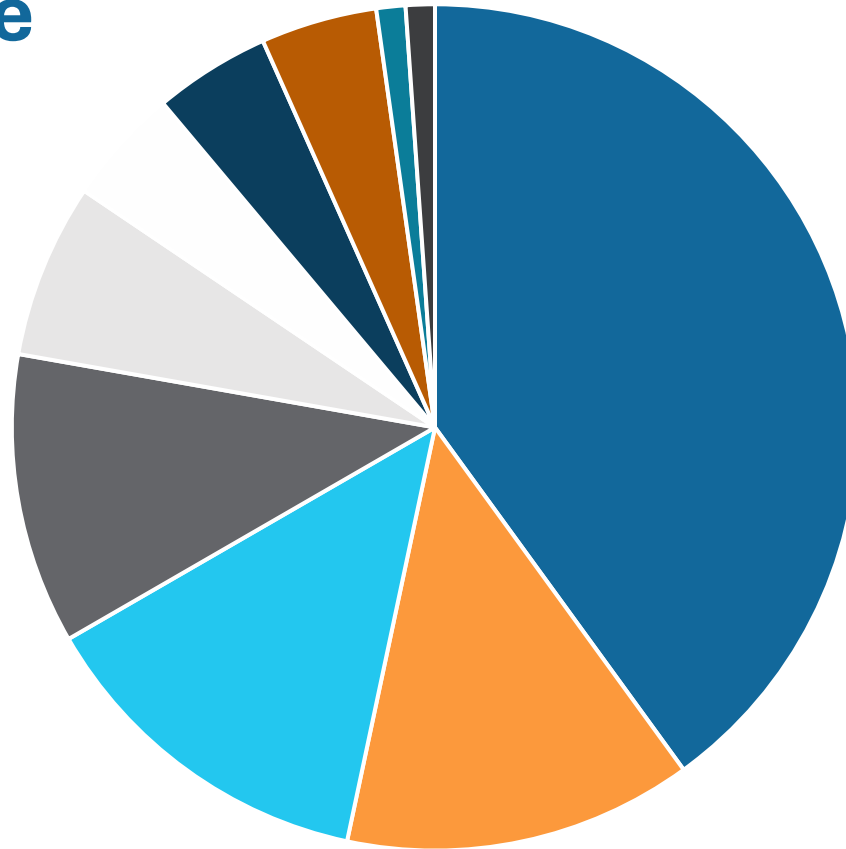
Supported by a Therapist



■ 61% Has a Therapist ■ 39% Does Not Have a Therapist



# Patient Cancer Type



- 40% GI
- 14% Breast
- 14% Sarcoma
- 11% Neuro
- 7 % Leukemia
- 4% GU
- 4% Lymphoma
- 4% Thoracic
- 1% Melonoma
- 1% Thyroid

25% “early” stage  
75% metastatic

“Too large and not specific enough. It was **upsetting to hear about peoples partners seriously improving** or going into remission while they're caregivers still complained about anxieties.”

“The mindfulness exercises were hard for me **on zoom.**”

“Several topics like **parenting and/or sex & intimacy** should be a part of the core lessons.”

“I would have liked **more small group time.**”

“I think an introductory session specifically geared toward **getting to know the other members of the group** on a more personal level would be helpful.”

## What didn't work

“**Validation** of ‘negative’ feelings like anger, shame, guilt that I often can't talk about with other loved ones.”

“The guided lessons provided me with **tools or frameworks that were useful**. Hearing from other people made me feel **less lost** as a caregiver and the guided meditations/exercises were a nice way to finish each session.”

“This experience is isolating and non-normative. **Hearing my own crazy thoughts**, feelings, and concerns from others was **helpful**.”

“I appreciated **the narrower scope** (that it was just for spouses/partners).”

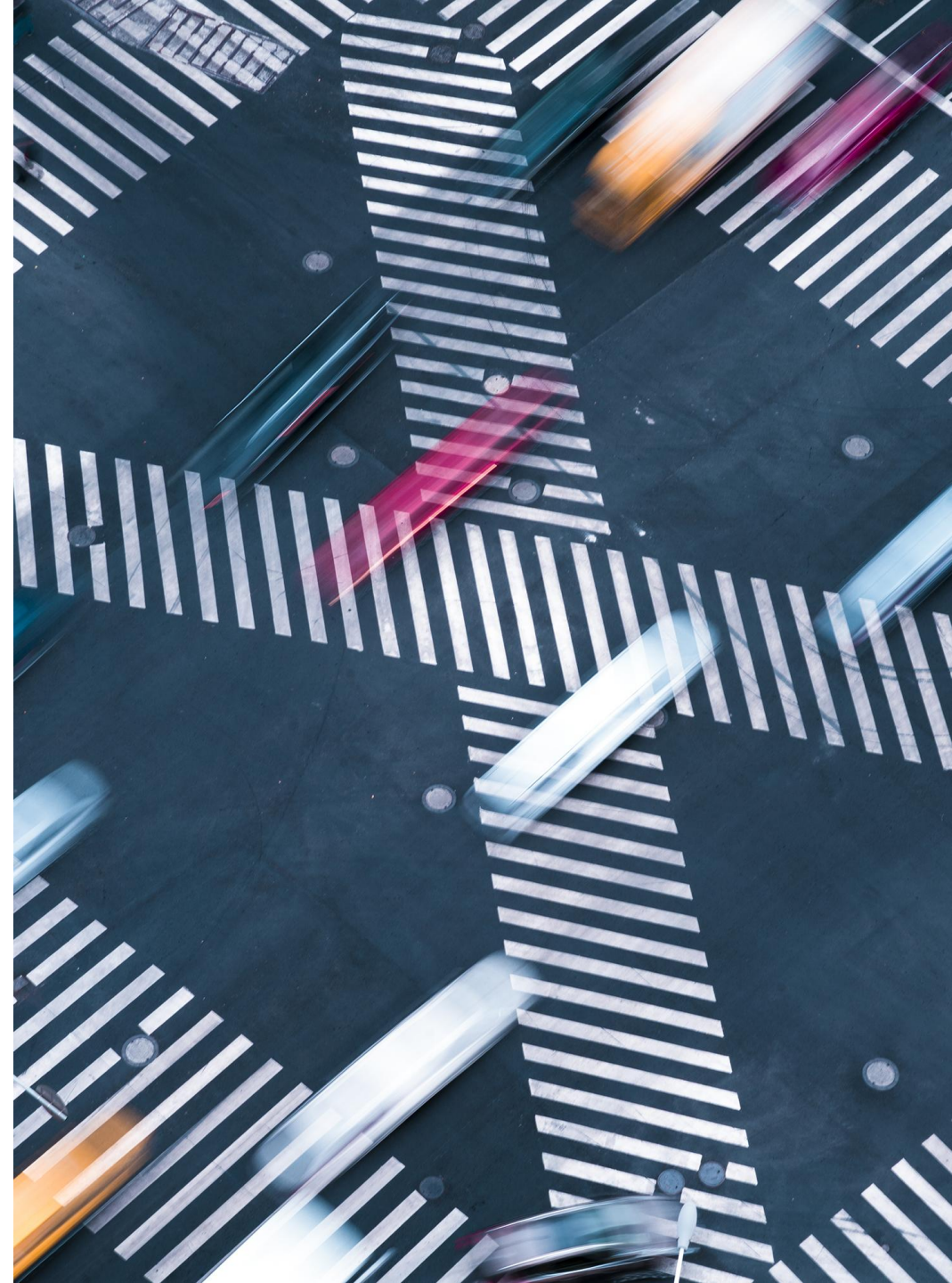
“I went into the group, thinking that a lot of the topics would not be helpful because I feel like they come up all the time, but it was really great to talk about them with **other people in the same situation and stage of life**.”

## What worked



## Road Blocks

- Wide YA age range
- Mixed cancer stages/prognoses
- Grief/bereavement if patient dies during group
- Outreach limitations
- Heavy administrative load
- Many participants need/want more than group





# Next Steps



- Expand data collection
- Quarterly reunions
- Tailored direct communication
- In-person event
- Partnership with bereavement services



# Thank you!

- Director of the Young Adult Program: Cristina Pozo-Kaderman, PhD
- Staff of YAP: Meghan Donovan and Mary Kenney
  
- Director of the Young Onset Colorectal Cancer Program: Kimmie Ng, MD
- Staff of YOCCC: Kristine Liu
  
- DFCI Department of Social Work



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# Questions