

Charting the Course: A Roadmap for Clinical Social Work Interventions in Radiation Therapy

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1. Initial Diagnosis/ 2. New Consult

The WOW around impact of diagnosis
Life changed in a moment...
What ifs? What now?



Opportunities for intervention:

- Meet a patient where they are at – what is important to them? Their worry? Their hope? Their immediate need?
- Provide space, normalize, reflect, and validate what they are feeling
- Assess for history of depression and anxiety
- Assess for trauma history, trauma response that could be activated by radiation therapy environment (Marshall et al, 2022; Icahn SPT)
- Assess for barriers caused by structural racism, poverty, marginalization, including fear of discrimination within medical care (Kronfli et al., 2022).
- If cancer is recurrent, opportunity to check in on emotional wellbeing, re-screen for distress, reconnect with palliative care and other forms of ongoing support

Scripts to help:

"It's understandable you..."
"It's common to..."
"I can see how..."
"That sounds (reflect with their words)"

3. Simulation

Starting to get real
How will it feel?
What will change?
Can I do this?



Opportunities for intervention:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Help identify intrusive worrisome thoughts
- Name and reframe
- Breathing techniques

Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs)

- Recognize the thoughts without judgment
- Visualization - picture the procedure treatment going well
- Mentally transport to a peaceful place (a real place)

Reframing

- "Mask is constricting" → "Mask is a tool to map your treatment"

Referral to music therapy, integrative med, yoga, tai chi, acupuncture
Focusing on what is within control: pausing; choosing how we respond; music selection during scan; communicating fears; pacing of visit; asking for / accepting help

Scripts to help:

"How could you know, you've never done this before"
"Of course it's scary to do something unknown"
"It becomes more real when the treatment process starts"

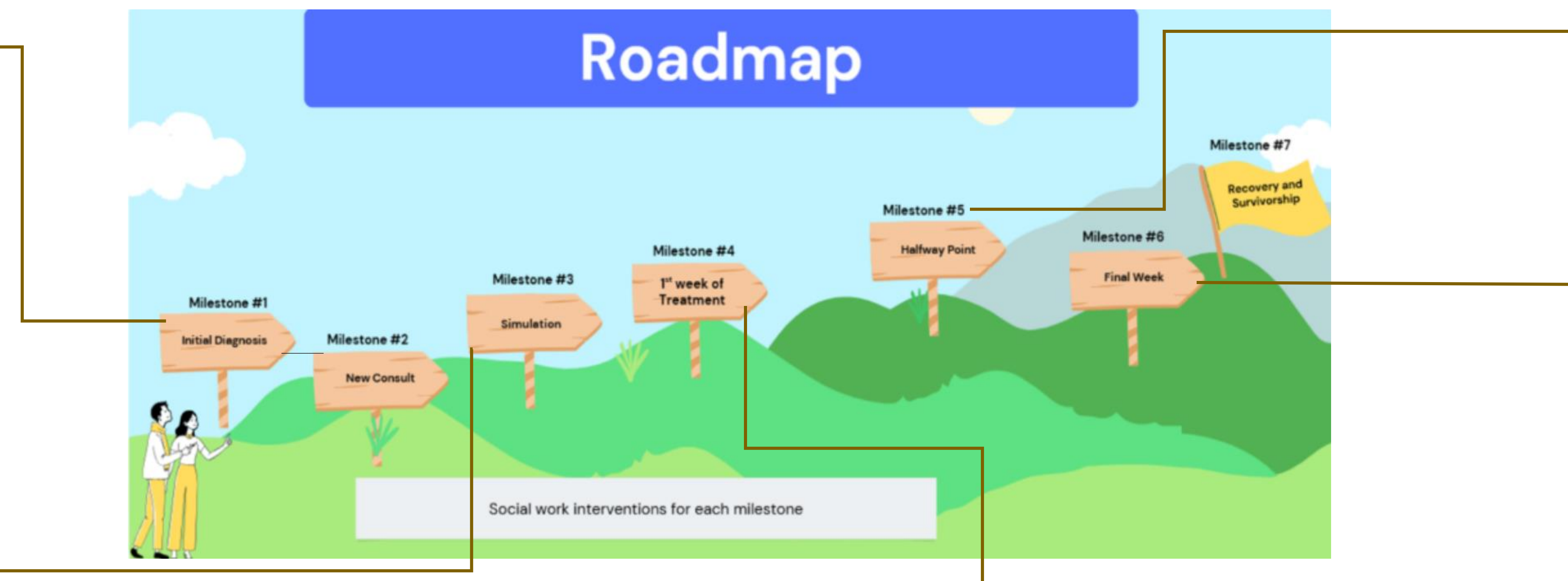
Introduction

Providing and prioritizing intervention to the emotional distress improves patients' overall well-being which in turn enables better compliance, outcomes, and reduction of psychosocial impacts of cancer. Without interventions for anxiety and depression, patients can experience difficulty getting to medical appointments, find reduced enjoyment or quality of life, and develop additional comorbidities (Ogunmuyiwa et al, 2022).

There are several helpful interventions when working with cancer patients that can be applied at various times during treatment. Some examples include Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBIs), Sensitive Practice Training (SPT), and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). MBIs have been shown to reduce psychosocial distress while fostering emotional and physical well-being (Chayadi et al, 2022). SPT may be offered as a universal precaution to reduce distress by identifying potential triggers, individualizing patient care, and promoting emotional safety (Marshall et al, 2022). CBT has been widely used as an intervention with cancer patients for anxiety and depression around their diagnosis and treatment (Lin et al, 2022).

Objective

The roadmap is intended to highlight key milestones throughout radiation treatment where interventions can be utilized to support patients.



5. Halfway Point

How do we know if treatment is working?
The side effects kick in. Fatigue, disfigurement, pain, skin changes, taste/appetite changes. Distress remains high, and severity of physical symptoms is closely linked with depression.
What if I want to quit?
Can also start taking a toll on caregivers/loved ones.

Opportunities for Intervention:

- Validating and normalizing the accumulation of the mental, emotional, and physical side effects
- Checking in with patients known to have mental health history, little social support, known barriers to care, or diagnoses linked to highest rates of distress (HNC, gyn, lung)
- Checking on caregiver burnout and support

Scripts to help:

"One step at a time, one breath at a time."
"It's ok to have a lot of different feelings in the same day."
"It is hard to get through, and you're doing it."
"If you knew how to make it different, you would."



6. Final Treatment

New Normal -
Things feel different, seem different, not quite the same as before diagnosis/treatment.
People around me are excited that I'm done, but I'm feeling sad, scared, worried...

Common reactions:

What now?
How will I know if it comes back?
"Scamxiety" is REAL

Opportunity for intervention:

Normalize and validate the complicated feelings around completion of treatment; normalize anxiety can increase after completion. Losing team and regular support, frequent health monitoring
Highlight achievement including learned coping skills

Options Moving Forward

- Support Group
- Survivorship classes
- Peer connection
- Community Counseling/EAP for ongoing support



4. First Treatment

How will it feel?
When do side effects start?
What should I do?

Opportunities for intervention:

- Remind medical team is there to help
- Encourage letting others support – provide transportation, help with childcare, meals, groceries
- The shift from being the supporter to being the support recipient
- Breathing exercises/Guided Imagery/calming music while on the treatment table

Scripts to help:

"It is a lot to take in, be gentle with yourself as you figure it out."
"Wait and see makes it hard to plan how you will feel."
"You enjoy helping others, why not let others help you too?"

