



The Life Navigation Framework™ for Cancer Survivorship

The Theoretical and Evidence-Based Rationale

Operating Premise

“Survivors often understand what they need to do for their health, wellbeing, and quality of life. The challenge for many is the lack of sufficient life navigation skills (self-management skills, life skills) required to make and sustain those changes, especially in the post-treatment stage. It's not a matter of “what” or “why”, but “how”. The Life Navigation Framework™ for Cancer Survivorship directly addresses this foundational gap.”

Abstract

The Life Navigation Framework™ for Cancer Survivorship addresses a critical gap in post-treatment care: while survivors are routinely advised to manage symptoms and adopt healthy behaviors, most do not have and are never taught the skills required to follow through with that advice.

Grounded in self-management theory, behavior change science, and positive psychology, this framework helps survivors build essential life navigation skills such as emotional regulation, goal setting, identity redefinition, and more, through a structured, experiential model.

It complements medical care by focusing on functional self-management capacity and treating survivorship as a developmental life stage. Survivors don't just need more information; they need the capacity to act on it. This framework provides tools and support to make that possible.

Theoretical and Evidence-Based Rationale

I. Introduction and Purpose

The Life Navigation Framework for Cancer Survivorship was developed to address a critical but underrecognized barrier in post-treatment care: while cancer survivors are routinely encouraged to take an active role in their own recovery and long-term well-being, most are never taught the skills required to do so effectively.

This framework is grounded in both lived clinical experience and evidence-based behavioral science, offering a structured approach to help survivors cultivate the practical, emotional, and psychological capacities they need to navigate the cancer experience.

This theoretical statement articulates the foundational rationale for the Life Navigation Framework, identifies the existing gaps it is designed to fill, and defines its alignment with survivorship care standards, behavior change science, and survivorship as a distinct developmental life stage.

Survivorship is often viewed as the final phase of treatment, but for many, it marks the beginning of a profound transition. Survivors must navigate new identities, recalibrate their goals, and rebuild life around altered priorities. We frame this as a *distinct life stage*: one that, like adolescence or retirement, requires guidance, reflection, and skill-building to thrive.

II. Foundational Problem: The Self-Management Paradox

Across national and international guidelines, including the NIH, Institute of Medicine (IOM), ASCO, and the PRISMS Framework, self-management is repeatedly emphasized as a cornerstone of effective survivorship care. Survivors are expected to manage symptoms, adopt healthy lifestyle behaviors, attend to psychosocial needs, and coordinate long-term medical care.

However, most survivorship programs operationalize self-management through education: what symptoms to look for, what behaviors to adopt, and when to seek help. The prevailing assumption is that awareness leads to action. Yet in clinical reality, a persistent paradox emerges:

Survivors often know what they “should” do but struggle to follow through.

Drawing on two decades of working with cancer patients and survivors in an academic medical center, a common theme was voiced:

“I know what I should be doing to take better care of myself. I just don’t know how to actually do it.”

This is not a gap of knowledge or willpower. It is a gap in functional self-management capacity: a set of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational skills that are foundational to long-term survivorship success.

III. Theoretical Foundations of the Framework

The Life Navigation Framework is grounded in five overlapping bodies of theory:

- A. Self-Management Theory.** Corbin and Strauss, and later Lorig et al., identify self-management as comprising three interdependent tasks: medical management, emotional management, and role management. While most programs focus on medical adherence, the Life Navigation Framework integrates all three domains, emphasizing skill-building across the full spectrum of survivor challenges.
- B. Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura).** This model identifies self-efficacy, outcome expectations, behavioral capability, and self-regulation as key determinants of behavior change. The Life Navigation Framework develops these capabilities explicitly through guided experiential learning, coaching, and peer modeling.
- C. Behavior Change Science.** Research by Gollwitzer and others demonstrates that intention does not lead to behavior change unless people are supported in forming implementation plans, regulating motivation, managing setbacks, and creating accountability structures. The Life Navigation Framework is designed to be that structure, fostering follow-through, not just intention.
- D. Positive Psychology and Life Design.** Meaning-making, strengths cultivation, values alignment, and psychological resilience are key drivers of posttraumatic growth and life satisfaction after cancer. This framework draws from those traditions, focusing on helping survivors rebuild not just their health, but their lives.
- E. Chinese Medical Theory.** The framework also draws from Chinese medical theory, drawing on the principles and strategies of patient participation in their own healing, health enhancement, and quality of life.

IV. Core Hypothesis: Functional Self-Management Requires Life Navigation Skills

The central hypothesis of this framework is that **successful survivorship depends not only on what survivors know, but on what they can do with what they know.**

This includes the ability to:

- Regulate emotions and energy
- Set, achieve, and maintain meaningful and realistic goals
- Manage time, tasks, and competing life domains
- Navigate uncertainty and re-establish identity
- Build and maintain supportive relationships

- Make decisions aligned with their values

These are some of the **life navigation skills**, a distinct and trainable set of functional capacities necessary for sustained self-management.

V. Structure of the Life Navigation Framework

The framework is delivered through a layered, experiential model:

1. **Thematic Learning Tracks.** Each month centers on a theme drawn from commonly reported survivor challenges (e.g., fatigue, identity shifts, isolation, motivation, re-entry).
2. **Experiential Skill Application.** Monthly themes are explored through weekly practices and reflections that allow survivors to apply life navigation skills in real-time to real challenges, guided by structured prompts, community discussion, and coaching support.
3. **Masterclasses and Coaching.** Survivors build mastery through deeper dives into each skill area (mindfulness, goal setting, resilience, values clarification, etc.) through self-paced cohort masterclasses and small group coaching.
4. **Supportive Infrastructure.** Group coaching, peer-to-peer mentoring, peer wisdom, and facilitated discussions provide the social scaffolding essential to behavior change.

The framework aligns with the components of the PRISMS Framework, with a focus on capacity-building rather than solely information delivery.

VI. Differentiators from Conventional Survivorship Programs

While many survivorship programs focus on health education, symptom management, or peer support, the Life Navigation Framework is distinguished by the following features:

- **Skills-Based Focus:** Teaches the *how*, not just the *what*.
- **Longitudinal Structure:** Designed to support survivors across months and years, not just brief sessions. Survivors individualize the experience based on their needs.
- **Behavioral Activation:** Integrates real-life experimentation, not passive consumption.
- **Whole-Person Orientation:** Addresses not just physical health, but identity, purpose, belonging, and self-responsibility.

- **Scalable and Complementary:** Functions alongside medical care, fills known support gaps, and is adaptable to individual survivor needs.
- **Accessible and Affordable:** This program is provided virtually on an easily accessible app (phone, tablet, and computer). It is also financially accessible for a monthly fee that most survivors can afford (scholarships are available).

VII. Implications for Health Systems and Survivorship Outcomes

Investing in the development of survivors' functional self-management capacities leads to:

- Improved adherence to follow-up care
- Reduced symptom burden and distress
- Better coping and adjustment
- Greater resilience and independence
- Enhanced quality of life

Abundant research provides evidence that patients and survivors with higher self-management skills fare better across the span of the cancer experience, with fewer side effects and symptoms, fewer hospitalizations, enhanced recovery, fewer recurrences, and lower mortality.

For health systems, this model offers a **scalable, cost-effective, and integrative** path toward more effective survivorship support. It aligns with NCCN distress screening mandates, PRISMS Framework self-management standards, and survivorship care planning best practices.

IIIX. Evidence-Based Gaps in Current Survivorship Programs

Numerous studies have identified dissatisfaction among survivors with post-treatment care, citing:

- Lack of psychosocial and behavioral follow-through support
- Programs that are too brief, passive, or generic
- High dropout or disengagement when education is not paired with support

For example:

A 2021 study in *Journal of Cancer Survivorship* found that 68% of survivors wanted "more guidance on *how* to manage life after treatment," not just symptom checklists.

The PRISMS framework notes the importance of emotional and behavioral strategies, but these are rarely implemented in practice.

A 2022 review in *Psycho-Oncology* stated that "effective self-management support must go beyond education and provide survivors with the psychological tools and behavioral training to adapt meaningfully."

IX. Survivorship as a Developmental Life Stage

Survivorship is not merely an endpoint. It is a complex life stage marked by identity transformation, social reintegration, and existential recalibration. Borrowing from **life course theory** and **post-traumatic growth research**, this framework acknowledges:

- That reentry is often more psychologically complex than treatment
- That survivors must reconstruct their sense of self, purpose, and future
- That developmental support is essential to this reconstruction

This justifies the framework's attention to values, strengths, emotional intelligence, and self-authorship.

X. Framework Validation and Evaluation Plan

The Life Navigation Framework is designed to be both **evidence-informed** and **practice-evaluable**.

Evaluation strategies include:

- **Short-term outcomes:** self-reported goal follow-through, confidence in navigating survivorship, and emotional resilience.
- **Process tracking:** engagement metrics, reflection participation, and coaching outcomes.
- **Longer-term vision:** future pilot partnerships with cancer centers to assess impact on quality of life, adherence to follow-up care, and cost-effectiveness. Data will be collected through participant feedback, reflective journaling, and pre- and post-self-assessments aligned with validated survivorship measures.

XI. Conclusion

The Life Navigation Framework represents a next-generation approach to survivorship care, moving beyond the limitations of education-only models and embracing the deeper developmental needs of life after cancer.

Survivors need more than advice. They need guidance in becoming the person who can act on that advice.

This framework provides that guidance through a structured, skill-centered, coaching-based, and community supported experience.