Following a diagnosis of cancer, feelings of isolation, helplessness, anxiety and/or depression can be overwhelming. Support groups have long been a popular option for patients and families in need of reassurance; a safe place to share experiences and concerns with others who are going through a similar experience. However, with the arrival of COVID-19 and its subsequent quarantine, public gatherings came to a halt, temporarily discontinuing support groups at Smilow Cancer Hospital. Support groups are a weekly option to offer solace and support for individuals with cancer.

With more than 20 support groups throughout Smilow Cancer Hospital’s Network, nearly 200 group members would be impacted by the COVID-19 quarantine. And with no opportunity to visit the hospital for supportive care services and loss of socialization with other patients, it was critical to get the groups up and running as soon as possible in some capacity. Virtual technology began to take shape across the hospital. Primarily used for department or team meetings, the technology was embraced by many including Bonnie Indeck, LCSW, Manager of Oncology Social Work and
The Cancer Caregivers Support Group, designed for family members and friends of patients, has seen its attendance double since its meetings shifted to a virtual setting. For Susan, a member whose adult child was recently diagnosed with brain cancer, being able to join from her home in Illinois has been a godsend.

Halley Robinson, LCSW, leader of the Lung Cancer Support Group, was initially skeptical. “I was worried attendance might drop off and about our patients’ ability to adapt to a new structure, because it was otherwise such a close-knit group. We only recently shifted from conference calls to using Zoom, and I have been pleasantly surprised and impressed with the resiliency of our members throughout it all. It has been wonderful for all of us to maintain that connection and has offered access to others who were unable to participate in the past due to one reason or another.”

Dawn Chamberlaine, a two-time lung cancer survivor, is one of Halley’s regular attendees. She commented, “While I miss the reassurance of having our meetings at Smilow and looking around the room to see how people are doing, our group has translated successfully to Zoom. Ultimately, the number one thing we give each other is hope and being a source of support for each other. No one knows what it (cancer) feels like, but in our meetings, everyone knows.”

The Cancer Caregivers Support Group, designed for family members and friends of patients, has seen its attendance double since its meetings shifted to a virtual setting. For Susan, a member whose adult child was recently diagnosed with brain cancer, being able to join from her home in Illinois has been a godsend. “My child lives in New Haven and I live outside Chicago, and when I flew in for his brain surgery, by chance I was able to join a meeting in person as he recovered. The members listened to me, were there for me, and shared resources I could not access anywhere else.” Now that Susan has returned home to Illinois, she can continue to participate in meetings and receive the support she has been unable to find locally.

Sustaining the face-to-face connections between members has been an underestimated benefit of the virtual Zoom meetings. Mary Strauss, LCSW, leader of the Cancer Caregivers, Head and Neck Cancers, and the Circle of Hope Support Groups, and co-leader of the Prostate Cancer group, explained, “our Prostate Cancer group meets twice a month and since the meetings are now virtual, it has been so well-received that our members do their own Zoom meetings on the weeks in-between our meetings, just so they can keep in touch.”

Overall, Mary notes that member enthusiasm has been high, attendance across her groups has increased, and she has several new members joining who now live out-of-state. “Virtual meetings have widened our outreach abilities.”

Looking ahead to when the quarantine is lifted, it is anticipated that a hybrid form of support groups will continue with a return to in-person meetings, but with a Zoom option.

“It is very reassuring to me to know our team of social workers and our members are in a good place. It has been an exciting development for our patients and their at-home support teams to have the continuity of care and support through technology,” said Bonnie. “Crisis like this encourage growth, and the overwhelmingly positive feedback we have received has been a wonderful silver lining.”