

COUNTERPART

Women supporting women with cancer

YEAR IN REVIEW 2020–2021



CONNECTING | SUPPORTING | INFORMING



Our activities in 2020–2021

KEY



Some of the locations where women have joined our **What's On webinars**



Some of the locations where women have joined our **What's On workshops**



Some of the locations where women have joined our **online exercise program**



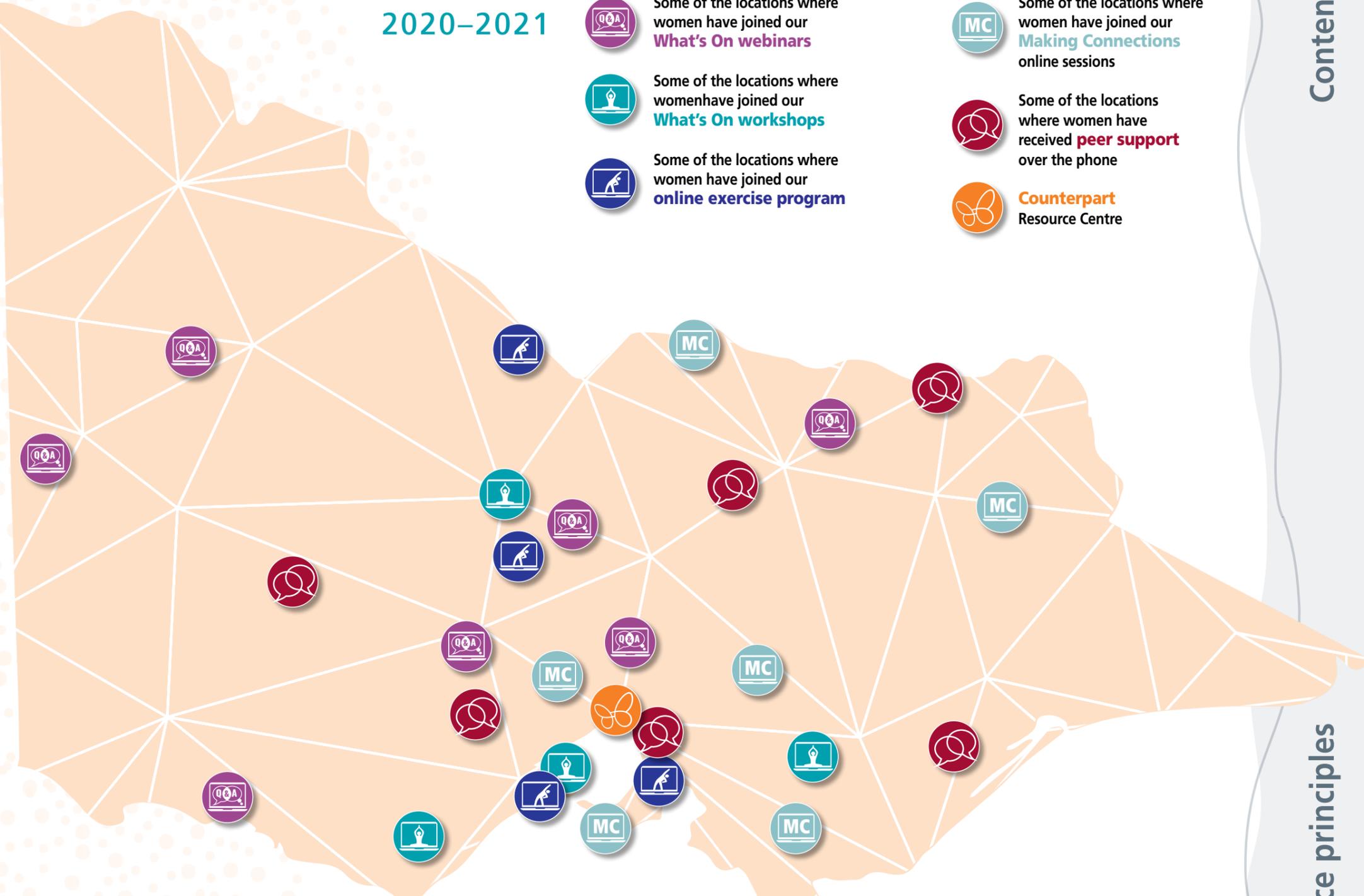
Some of the locations where women have joined our **Making Connections** online sessions



Some of the locations where women have received **peer support** over the phone



Counterpart Resource Centre



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Our service principles

Acknowledge difference We recognise that every person's experience of breast or a gynaecological cancer is different and must be seen in the broader context of their lives.

No advice We share experiences and give support. We do not give medical, legal or financial advice or counselling.

Welcoming environment We provide a welcoming, accessible and safe environment.

Encourage participation We actively encourage people to participate in the development and operation of the service.

Empower people We are committed to enhancing people's skills and capacity to make their own informed choices.

Respect privacy We respect the privacy of people using our service.

Non-judgemental We provide information and support in a non-judgemental way.

High standards We maintain high standards in all aspects of the service and regularly evaluate the service's relevance to consumers, its sustainability, and effectiveness.

'The Peer Support Volunteers understood my fears, the stress of navigating a cancer diagnosis and they are brilliant at answering questions and empathising.'

Ashleen's story

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'The online event program has opened up many opportunities for me to connect with the Counterpart community and learn new things, despite living far away.'

Judy's story

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There was also a true sense of inclusion/connection with our instructor which was so key for the program to work.

Lyn's story

page 8

CEO's message

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the *Counterpart Year in Review 2020–2021*. It has been another year of uncertainty as we all live and work through the continued impacts of COVID-19, which has touched our lives in many different ways.

Women's Health Victoria (WHV) has seen first-hand the significant impacts on women over the last 18 months and the consequences of ongoing gender inequality. As an organisation dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of all Victorian women, we take a gendered approach to health that reduces inequalities and improves health outcomes for women.

As a service of WHV, Counterpart strives to improve access to supportive care services and information to improve health outcomes for women with breast or a gynaecological cancer, as it has done for over 18 years. We know, particularly during COVID-19, many women have borne the stresses of work, family life and caring responsibilities while also needing to attend to their own health and wellbeing. At Counterpart, we recognise how important it is to stay connected and supported in these uncertain times. We have focused on ensuring Victorian women with breast or a gynaecological cancer can get the support and information they need, in safe and accessible ways. You can read about our activities and inspiring stories from women we supported in the following pages.

None of our work could have happened without the dedication and commitment of our Peer Support Volunteers who have continued to provide support and connection over the phone, despite the challenges. Talking to a woman who has an understanding of what it feels like to receive a cancer diagnosis and treatment is a very special gift. I want to thank all the volunteers for their contributions during the year and their willingness to adapt to new ways of working. In particular, I want to congratulate Pam and Teresa for achieving 15 years of service and Bridget for 10 years of service: incredible milestones and even more notable in this time of COVID-19.

I also want to thank our major funder, the Victorian Government, other donors including Pink Affair, the health professionals we work with, the many health and wellbeing creatives who deliver our events, and our Counterpart Advisory Group members.

To the wonderful Counterpart staff team, thank you for continuing to think creatively about how best to support women with cancer in these challenging times and for continuing to support our amazing volunteers.

As I mentioned last year, Counterpart wants women with all types of cancer to have access to support services, especially connecting through peer support. Planning for the extension of our services has begun. This will be a careful, considered process, collaborating with existing volunteers, women with cancer, other cancer organisations and health professionals.

Whatever the future holds, Counterpart will continue to connect, support and inform women with cancer to live well.



Dianne Hill
CEO, Women's Health Victoria

Reconciliation action

In 2019, Women's Health Victoria's Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) demonstrated a commitment to working towards a society in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, histories, knowledge and cultures are respected; the impacts of invasion, colonisation and racism are acknowledged and addressed; Aboriginal self-determination is supported; and mainstream services are culturally safe and inclusive.

Through this first phase, a number of activities occurred around upskilling staff and volunteers through cultural safety training and other learning opportunities. In the next stage, through our Innovate RAP, Counterpart will talk with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with cancer to understand how we can improve the ways in which we work to create a safe and empowering space to access our services.

About the artwork

You will see elements throughout this year's publication that are part of this work created for Women's Health Victoria by artist Madison Connors, a proud and strong Yorta Yorta (Wolthica), Dja Dja Wurrung and Gamilaroi woman. You can read this beautiful artwork's creation story and more information about Madison on the Women's Health Victoria website.

whv.org.au



Manager's message

Every year we celebrate the ways in which Counterpart connects, supports and informs Victorian women with cancer. While COVID-19 has affected how women have interacted with Counterpart, our core activities of peer support, and providing informative and wellbeing-related activities continued.

Thank you with gratitude to our Peer Support Volunteers – we know how your words of support and encouragement have helped so many women over this difficult year. Thank you to all our other volunteers for staying in touch with us, as we all wait for the impact of COVID-19 to diminish. We are excited to be welcoming more volunteers to this amazing group of women, following a training program that will be completed in September.

This year has been full of challenges for so many in our Victorian community. We thank all the health professionals and presenters who have continued to let women know about Counterpart and contributed to our program of events despite all the pressures they too have faced.

To all the people and groups who have donated their time and money to our service – thank you. Every donation allows us to provide something extra, like rural wellbeing days. In particular, I thank Pink Affair for allowing us to pilot an online exercise program and support all the learning that came from that.

We continue to look forward, optimistically, to the time when we can go back into hospitals to support women as they go through treatment or meet together in groups to share our experiences face to face. However, we have learnt so much about working in the online environment, and these innovations will remain so that women, wherever they live, can have access to the services of Counterpart.

I want to thank our colleagues across Women's Health Victoria for their vision and enthusiasm in keeping gender equality on the agenda. Finally, my profound thanks to the Counterpart team who continue to think creatively and innovatively about how to make Counterpart services relevant, informative, engaging and sometimes even fun for Victorian women with cancer.



Fiona McRae
Manager, Counterpart

Counterpart Advisory Group Chair's message

Since 2007, an everchanging but always dedicated group of women who have an experience of cancer and health professionals working in the cancer sector have been meeting to share their expertise, provide advice and discuss ideas that assist Counterpart to continue developing their services to Victorian women with cancer. This group is the Counterpart Advisory Group (CAG).

The CAG continues to evolve and, at the start of 2021, we farewelled volunteer Janice and welcomed volunteer Trish. This year all meetings were held over Zoom, which allowed all members to participate. We are indebted to these busy women who make time to read the documents, develop their ideas and contribute to discussions – all to improve the way Victorian women with cancer receive connection, support and information from Counterpart. Thank you.

On behalf of the CAG, I extend thanks to the Counterpart volunteers, dedicated women who, even during COVID-19, continue to support women with cancer and reduce the sense of isolation that many of these women are experiencing. You provide support and connection to women with cancer that very few others can: the sensitive care that only another woman who has experienced a cancer diagnosis can offer.

I sincerely thank everyone who has assisted Counterpart to continue to support women with breast or a gynaecological cancer. Women can feel very alone throughout the period of cancer diagnosis and treatment and, for some, in the years following. In this past year of increased isolation, the value of caring and personal support is immeasurable. The targeted services offered by Counterpart are a team effort and the focus on providing compassionate support that is relevant and useful to women as they are diagnosed, treated and in the years after is vital.



Christine Evely
Chair, Counterpart
Advisory Group

Women supporting women

Peer support

Counterpart Peer Support Volunteers use their own experience of breast or a gynaecological cancer diagnosis to help others. They provide a special understanding to women who connect with our service.

This knowing makes our Peer Support Volunteers best placed to offer an empathetic listening ear, moral support and encouragement while also assisting women in finding reliable, evidence-based information to suit their current situation.

Our team of Peer Support Volunteers are women who have been selected based on very specific criteria and participate in a professionally facilitated and extensive training program with input from qualified presenters.

This year, during ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, our volunteers have remained flexible and continued to make peer support phone calls from home. This dedication and resilience has meant that women feeling the effects of isolation of a cancer diagnosis now more than ever, have been able to access support from a woman who has an understanding of what she is going through.

Again, due to COVID-19, we have been unable to coordinate our regular mail-outs. Peer Support Volunteers and Resource Centre staff phoned women who did not have an email address on file to check in and see if they were in need of support. By reaching out, we updated many women's details and could send information about our online events. Some women also requested peer support and follow up calls, and many were posted meditation or relaxation CDs to support them through the isolation of lockdowns.

Counterpart's peer support is the listening and understanding that only another woman who has had cancer can truly provide.



Thanks very much for the work your service does, I've had several women recently note how appreciative they were for the telephone support.'

Lisa Carson, Acting Breast Care Nurse Consultant and Oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist, Bendigo Health

I wish I'd found Counterpart earlier in my cancer experience. I may not have felt so alone. To be able to speak to a volunteer would have brought much comfort and information that would have been invaluable.'

Helen, volunteer and service user

Women supporting women

Supporting women with advanced/metastatic cancer

The challenges faced by women living with cancer that has spread to other areas of the body can be different to women with earlier stages of cancer. Our Peer Support Volunteers, some of whom have had their own lived experience of advanced/metastatic breast or gynaecological cancers provide valuable support and guidance to women who have received this diagnosis. They compassionately listen, provide emotional support and help women find information they want.

Counterpart's Making Connections program runs sessions specifically for women affected by advanced/metastatic breast or gynaecological cancers. This gives women opportunities to get tailored information as well as share with other women experiencing advanced cancer.

The whole presentation was terrific. So much valuable information, clearly presented. Easy to understand. Friendly warm and professional.'

Bone metastases and breast cancer webinar participant

Bridge of Support

Our Bridge of Support program connects Counterpart's experienced Peer Support Volunteers to women having cancer treatment. This program is provided at the Victorian Comprehensive Cancer Centre (Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, and the Royal Melbourne and Royal Women's hospitals) and Sunshine Hospital. When visiting these hospitals, Peer Support Volunteers provide comfort and reassurance to women during difficult times, and link women to other support options which can continue to be useful through all stages of their cancer experience.

Due to restrictions of COVID-19, the Bridge of Support program was on hold this year. During this time, we kept in contact with health professionals at our partner hospitals to make sure women could access our services if they wished. Our simple online referral form makes it quick and easy for doctors, nurses and other health professionals to connect women to our peer support program. We're looking forward to a time when it is safe for Bridge of Support to return.

If you are a health professional who would like to refer a woman, visit counterpart.org.au/refer/

Ashleen's STORY

My breast care nurse told me about Counterpart last year when I was diagnosed.

During the first few months after diagnosis, in the midst of so many appointments, starting treatment so suddenly and meeting all the different specialists, it was reassuring speaking to someone who'd been in a similar position themselves, with their own cancer story. The Peer Support Volunteers understood my fears, the stress of navigating a cancer diagnosis and they are brilliant at answering questions and empathising.

Being diagnosed in the middle of Melbourne's second lockdown, made an already difficult time even more difficult. Without being able to see family or friends in person, having someone to chat to that understands the difficulties of diagnosis and treatment was so lovely. Having a kind, supportive ear to chat to without judgement made me feel less isolated. When you're diagnosed you feel like you are the only person in the world it's happening to and having the chance to chat to Peer Support Volunteers allows you to feel not-so alone and show you there is hope at the end of this very long treatment journey.

During my 6 months off work for chemotherapy, I also attended several Counterpart webinars and online workshops on a variety of cancer-related topics, which I've found to be interesting and informative.



Judy's STORY

I discovered Counterpart after my first cancer diagnosis 20 years ago and have attended outreach events over the years. The online event program has opened up many opportunities for me to connect with the Counterpart community and learn new things, despite living far away. The webinars Counterpart provide are well researched and presented, they are current with relevant information. I often find myself taking notes during the webinars so I can refer to them later, and also to share with my husband and members of our local metastatic breast cancer support group. The information often has practical applications for me, for example the gut microbiome session prompted helpful changes in my diet.

I've found the activity workshops to be a welcome hour of fun, movement and relief from daily challenges. Each session has included encouraging practices that have enhanced my wellbeing and I feel supported and cared for by the thoughtful preparation involved.

These online sessions have been particularly helpful to me during COVID-19 as another way to ameliorate isolation and stay connected with people.



Women supporting women

Exercise

Growing evidence suggests that it is important for exercise to be an essential part of recovery during and after cancer treatment. Counterpart has always supported women to exercise with free practical classes and information.



Stepping into Wellness exercise instructor Judy Sammut

As face-to-face sessions were not an option this year, we were fortunate to be able to run a Stepping into Wellness (SIW) online pilot program. This free six-week program provided women with the opportunity to exercise from the comfort of their homes while under the careful direction of our experienced instructor Judy. Overall, the pilot was very successful and, importantly, gave women across Victoria the opportunity to join in. We plan to run at least another online program in 2021 and will resume face-to-face programs when it is feasible.

Stepping into Wellness continues to be made possible by the generous support of Pink Affair.



'I found the class to be perfectly suited to my level. Sometimes I was challenged and other times I managed quite well. I was supported if I was unable to complete an activity well or for the duration, but I felt I improved through the course.'

SIW online pilot program participant, December 2020

'I was inspired by Judy and some of the other ladies who were exercising under difficult conditions so I was inspired to be less lazy and will make exercising part of every day.'

SIW online pilot program participant, December 2020

Women supporting women

Research

Understanding more about the impact of Counterpart's support for women with cancer, especially the impact of peer support, is an important strand of our work. Excitingly, we have partnered with two universities this year, to add to this understanding.

Deakin University students are interviewing women who have spoken to a Peer Support Volunteer. They are asking women about their experiences, to analyse the benefits of peer support to women who use our service and to identify how we can improve.

Master of Social Work students from the University of Melbourne have completed a complex exploratory study of our processes around talking with women: how we collect and record information and how it helps us better recognise who is using Counterpart and where gaps exist. This project will assist us in improving our processes to make sure we are making our services accessible to Victorian women with cancer.

As a service that prioritises the voices of women with cancer, we have also been involved in a number of projects and groups across the broader cancer sector. These included an extension to the My Care Plan for women with endometrial cancer and development of a risk profile tool for women with breast and ovarian cancer. Thank you to the women who have volunteered to join these groups and projects – all designed to improve experiences of how women with cancer are treated.

We also collect feedback on all the events we run. This helps us plan new programs and make sure we keep improving their delivery. Thank you to all the women who take time to provide us with feedback.



Lyn's STORY

Taking part in the Stepping into Wellness program online made me feel like I wasn't alone, regardless of lockdown enforcement. The sessions were so accessible, you don't have to travel distances to get there or rely on someone to drive you. It fitted in well with my needs at the time and I didn't have to worry about the possibility of cross infection.

It was comforting to be in a group with other women who had similar health issues/experiences. There was also a true sense of inclusion/connection with our instructor which was so key for the program to work. The classes were beneficial to my wellbeing, I felt more in control of my physical self and therefore stronger mentally.



Donna's STORY

Personally, I felt honoured to be asked to be part of the Endometrial Cancer Reference Group as a member of Counterpart's community who has experienced firsthand endometrial (uterine) cancer and all that goes with being diagnosed and the treatment and then afterwards when the treatment comes to an end. After last year when I was first diagnosed and went through treatment, to come out the other side of that and not feel happy about it, that was a shock to my system. I think that was worse for me than the treatment as I felt very much alone and abandoned. I was given a lot of information last year that I was not ready for. More specifically, I was not ready for psychological help or any support networks as I did not know what I needed. I reached out to Counterpart this year as part of getting the support and help I needed. I love being a part of the reference group to provide information from someone who has been there.

The chance to help other women who will be diagnosed with endometrial cancer and go through the treatment is why I wanted to get involved as soon as I was asked. To help others – for me I need my diagnosis to mean something and if that means helping other women then that is good. What I have learned so far from participating in the reference group is information is so important. If the right information is there from the start it can be so helpful.

Our volunteers and peer support



Activity

- Peer support from home
- Peer support from the Resource Centre
- Updating addresses from home
- Promotional activities

Peer support - Top 5 topics discussed



541 people used the service
1405 interactions

86% have been diagnosed with breast cancer

14% have been diagnosed with a gynaecological cancer

26% have identified that they are living with an advanced/metastatic diagnosis.

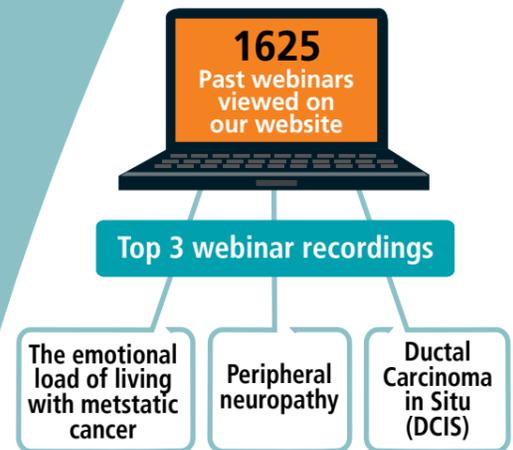


Top 4 languages spoken (after English)
Greek
Spanish
Vietnamese
Tagalog

(Where language has been reported)

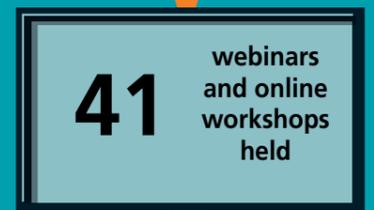


Past webinars

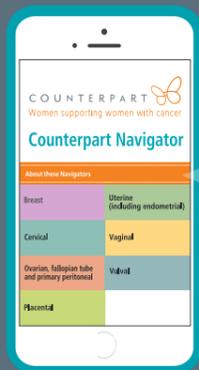


CONNECTING | SUPPORTING | INFORMING

Events



Online resources



2064 times Counterpart Navigator was used

29% using a computer or laptop

71% using a mobile device

2020-2021 AT A GLANCE

Online communications



Social media

Facebook likes 593

Twitter followers 369

Webinars

About cervical cancer

Dr Deborah Neesham, Gynaecological Oncologist, Royal Melbourne Hospital

Advance care planning

Catherine Kelly and Sue Matthews, Advance Care Planning Australia

Bras and breast forms

Genevieve Gort, Breast Care Victoria

Breast reconstruction

Mr Dean Trotter, Head of Breast Plastics, Royal Women's and Royal Melbourne hospitals

Cancer-related fatigue

Dr Elizabeth Pearson, Allied Health Researcher, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre.

Ductal Carcinoma In Situ (DCIS)

Dr Meron Pitcher, Breast Surgeon, Western Health.

Early menopause and cancer

A/Prof. Amanda Vincent, A/Prof. Jacqueline Boyle, Dr Kate Johnston-Ataata, Dr Rhonda Garad, Monash Centre for Health Research and Implementation Early Menopause Research Project; Rebecca, Counterpart Volunteer

Gut microbiome

Sandra Villella, Naturopath, Jean Hailes for Women's Health

Heart health: links to cancer treatment

Julie-Anne Mitchell and Jen Conway, Heart Foundation; Prof. Liza Thomas, Cardiologist, Westmead Hospital NSW

Lymphoedema

Helen Eason, Physiotherapist

Nipple tattooing

Monique Baldacchino, Breast Care Nurse, Royal Women's Hospital

Pelvic floor problems after gynaecological cancer treatment

Rebecca Liberatore, Senior Pelvic Floor Physiotherapist/ Lymphoedema Therapist

Scars, cording and breast swelling

Sachini Ganhewa, Oncology Physiotherapist/ Lymphoedema Therapist

Sexual health and wellbeing after cancer

Dr Vicki Windholz, Royal Women's Hospital

Online workshops

All is calm

Lynda Evans, Social Worker

Belly dance

Charni Pilkington, Instructor, Happy Hips Belly Dance

Chair yoga

Sarasvati Sally Dawson, Yoga and Meditation Teacher

Counterpart end-of-year event*

Nadia Addabbo, Meditation Practitioner

Dance flow

Sally Low, Feldenkrais Practitioner and Physiotherapist, Salamander Centre

Feldenkrais (2 sessions)

Sally Low, Feldenkrais Practitioner and Physiotherapist, Salamander Centre

Introduction to mindful self-compassion

Suzanne Peyton, Mindfulness Teacher, The Mindful Well

Meditation (2 sessions)

Matt Young, Melbourne Meditation Centre

Mindful self-compassion

Jo Gniel, Counsellor, landscape of life

Qi gong

Dorota Swiderski, Qi gong Practitioner

Restorative yoga (2 sessions)

Loretta Leigh, Reflexologist and Yoga Instructor

Cancer and wellbeing day

Dance flow

Sally Low, Feldenkrais Practitioner and Physiotherapist, Salamander Centre

Exercise basics

Natalie Craven, Exercise Physiologist, Northern Health

Healthy eating after cancer

Steph Labourne, Clinical Dietitian, Northern Health

How to meditate

Nadia Addabbo, Meditation Practitioner

Wellbeing discussion and creative activity

Sandra Buchanan, Counsellor and Creative Therapist

Cancer and wellbeing day

Clinical trials for metastatic cancer

Dr Shirley Wong, Medical Oncologist

Decision making with your oncology team

Dr Michelle White, Medical Oncologist

Financial, legal and workplace support

Denise Beovich, Cancer Council Victoria

Mindful self-compassion

Jo Gniel, Counsellor, landscape of life

Unseen: the stories we make of our lives

Michelle Irving, Survivorship Coach

Webinars and online workshops

Bone metastases and breast cancer

Dr Bianca Devitt, Medical Oncologist, Yarra Oncology

Managing symptoms of metastatic cancer

Dr Adrian Dabscheck, Palliative Medicine Consultant, Western Health

Mindful self-compassion

Jo Gniel, Counsellor, landscape of life

Treatment options for metastatic breast cancer

Dr Belinda Yeo, Medical Oncologist, Olivia Newton-John Cancer Wellness and Research Centre

*not counted in webinar/online event total on page 11

Webinars and online workshops

The free events provided by Counterpart as part of the What's On and Making Connections programs were exclusively online this year due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions.

Webinars have proven to be a valuable source of information to women from across Victoria, providing access to experienced and qualified presenters. Webinar highlights this year include the Heart health: links to cancer treatment session presented by the Heart Foundation and Treatment options for metastatic breast cancer with Dr Belinda Yeo. We recorded 21 webinars this year. These will be available on our website for women to access at any time during their cancer experience.

Although we have missed holding in-person workshops, the online format has allowed women to join sessions from the safety and comfort of their homes: some feeling relaxed enough to participate in their dressing gowns. Women have told us that these sessions have provided a sense of connection and support during some of the most isolating times they've been through.

Online Cancer and Wellbeing Days

We held two online Cancer and Wellbeing Days, one for women at all stages of their cancer experience in November 2020 and a special day of events for women with metastatic/advanced cancer in March 2021. For a list of the sessions that were part of these events see details on the previous page.

We're really looking forward to returning to face-to-face sessions when it is safe to do so.



'Webinars like these are very useful for people living a loooong way from a capital city. It helps to feel connected. It also helps to hear other people's stories.'

Early menopause and cancer webinar participant

'I really enjoyed the session and found I was moving in a much more fluid way at the end. It was very absorbing like mindfulness. Many of us have some limitations with movement due to surgery or radiation.'

Dance flow online workshop participant

'The presenter was very clear in her instruction. I thought the imagery she offered up so that we could understand the move was very helpful. It felt like a kind, safe place to experience something new. I will be seeking out other opportunities to do Qi gong again as a result. Thank you.'

Qi gong online workshop participant

Early menopause is menopause occurring before age 45 years. Premature ovarian insufficiency is loss of ovarian function before age 40 years.

One quarter of women are premenopausal at diagnosis and treatment will cause early menopause in most of these women

Early menopause and cancer webinar

Restorative yoga online workshop

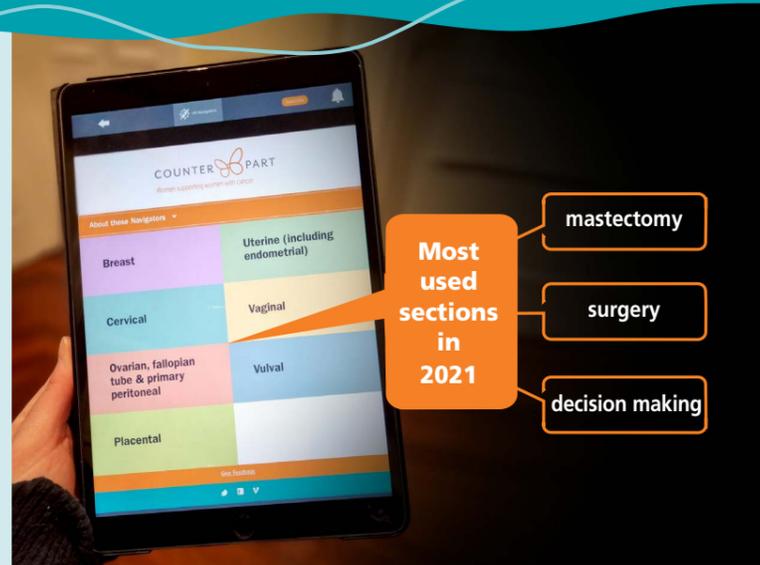
Connecting with information

Counterpart Navigator

Women often say that they are overwhelmed by the amount of information available about cancer. It can also be hard to know what information is reliable. The Counterpart Navigator is an online resource that connects women to reliable, up-to-date, evidence-based information.

The Counterpart Navigator covers early breast cancer and all stages of six gynaecological cancers. Designed in collaboration with women who have cancer, the Navigator makes finding reputable information easier. Health professionals also value being able to refer their patients to accessible and reliable information in the one place.

All resources included on the Navigator have been reviewed by qualified Australian health professionals and women who have experienced a cancer diagnosis. It is available online or via the free, easy-to-download app. Visit counterpart.org.au/navigators



'Counterpart is an important service offering women of all ages and ethnicities current relevant information and support after a diagnosis. The Navigator app allows women to access quality information from various sources.'

Elizabeth Foster, Breast Care Nurse, Austin Hospital

Redevelopment of our website

This year we have been redeveloping our website, counterpart.org.au. Work is still ongoing as we fit this big project in around our regular staff schedule. We are currently working with Attractor Solutions to launch our new website later in 2021. We are very grateful to all those who have assisted by attending focus groups, user testing how we organise information and providing their feedback.

We have made some immediate improvements to the usability of our past webinars page to make it easier for women to find recorded webinars on the topics that interest them. Our past webinars are a very important resource that gives women access to recent and relevant information from presenters at any time.

Topics covered in these webinars include:

- sexual health and wellbeing after cancer
- managing symptoms of metastatic cancer
- cancer-related fatigue
- shrinking your worries
- lymphoedema
- cancer and bone health
- medical acupuncture
- medicinal cannabis.

To view our webinars visit counterpart.org.au/webinars

Connecting with information

e-update and 'iso emails'

Our monthly e-updates continued as normal this year, providing women the opportunity to book into our events and keeping them updated on recent studies and developments within the cancer space. We also sent out monthly 'iso emails' during the months when Victorians were in isolation due to the pandemic. These emails provided some uplifting energy during these challenging times and were filled with heart-warming stories, free or low-cost activities to do from home, and helpful resources for mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.

Women felt these messages were helpful when facing the difficulties that come with living with cancer and being isolated from loved ones.



'Thank you so much for what you are doing. Every time an email from you hits the inbox I breathe a little easier knowing I'm about to be treated to exactly what I need. In every email there's a carefully curated collection of ideas, resources and distractions that offer support at many levels, in different ways. It's a delight.'

'But ultimately, what your email does is tell me how much you care about what you are doing. And while I may not use or follow up every offering, somehow just knowing you are there, doing this work in support of all of us, makes me feel like I can face another day.'

Anna, service user



A health professional's story

ROS DEACON

Physiotherapist and Accredited Lymphoedema Practitioner, Bendigo Health

As a physio and lymphoedema practitioner working in cancer rehab in a large regional hospital for over 30 years I have seen many changes in treatment regimens, surgical procedures and supportive care services. I am fortunate to have ready access to many allied health and medical people to assist me in my care of patients. Sometimes, some patients are overwhelmed with being in a hospital and feel really out of their comfort zone. It can also be challenging for women in rural areas, particularly those in very traditional farming families to put themselves first and take that first step needed to access support. It is these women who I have been able to link in with Counterpart.

The process to refer is simple, and the response from Counterpart almost immediate on all occasions. It has been helpful to have the referral system there throughout the pandemic as the phone calls have been beneficial to women during these times when face-to-face help has been unavailable.

I also work in the private sector where ready access to supportive care is more complicated and often costly. Being able to refer patients to a Counterpart Peer Support Volunteer has made all the difference in these patients feeling they have someone who understands and can be there with them on their journey.

Our people

Our volunteers

Thank you to everyone who has volunteered in 2020–2021. You are all integral members of the team and it is because of you that we could continue to connect, support and inform Victorian women with breast or a gynaecological cancer through some of the most isolating times they will experience.

As with many other volunteering services, the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns impacted our volunteer program. With the cancelling of face-to-face support and activities, it unfortunately meant that many opportunities for Counterpart volunteers were not available.

We were, however, able to offer some opportunities for Peer Support Volunteers to provide peer support from their own homes. A number of volunteers also called people to update their email addresses. At a time when many felt isolated, this provided an opportunity for connection and peer support if it was needed.

We managed to keep in touch with volunteers throughout the year, and to check in with the Peer Support Volunteers to gauge how they felt about volunteering back in the Resource Centre when the major lockdown ended. We recognise that 2020 was a difficult year and that volunteering during challenging times was not suitable for everyone. As we hope that many of our programs can re-start in the next year, we look forward to reconnecting with all the wonderful women who volunteer with Counterpart. Thank you all for your ongoing support.

Volunteers who provided peer support 2020–2021

Ailsa	Jo	Pam S
Barbara	Khim	Penny
Bridget	Lyn	Sue S
Chris O	Marg	Teresa
Danni	Margaret	Trish F
Emma	May	Trish M
Evelyn	Meri	Wilma
Jenny	Pam	

Peer Support Volunteer Greta died in December 2020.

Greta provided hope to many women with her calm reassurance, her smile and the sharing of her own experience of cancer. She touched the lives of many women, was a mentor to other volunteers and a vibrant presence for all who came into contact with her. We miss her and remember her.



Our people

Volunteers give hope in times of uncertainty

Counterpart volunteers are a wonderful group of skilled and compassionate women. They offer hope and encouragement to women who feel alone in their cancer experience. However, this is not their only role. Our volunteers are fundamental to all activities of the entire service. Their voices, as women with cancer, as well as volunteers, play a vital role in shaping the support we provide and making sure our programs are aligned with our service principles.

During the year, 23 volunteers contributed an incredible 873 hours of their time. They have:

- remained flexible to provide encouraging emotional support over the phone from home, during the COVID-19 pandemic
- travelled into our Resource Centre to provide this support in between lockdowns and restrictions
- shared their lived experiences by participating in online events, providing valuable insights on a range of topics, such as early menopause and cancer and bras and breast forms
- participated in studies, projects and committees to improve cancer support for others
- supported us in recruiting more volunteers.

We were fortunate enough to have two in-person get togethers to thank our volunteers for their valuable contributions throughout the year. We held an outdoor picnic in the park in December 2020 and celebrated National Volunteer Week with a morning tea in May 2021. This was a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the efforts of all Counterpart volunteers and in particular the achievements of three amazing women, Bridget, Pam and Teresa who have volunteered at Counterpart for ten and fifteen years. It was also lovely to reconnect with each other and share some much-needed laughs.

This year we began the recruitment process for our next Peer Support Volunteer training intake. Stories from current volunteers were shared in *The Senior* and *Health Victoria* publications and we also ran a series of community announcements on local radio stations. We are very pleased that a new group of women have decided to support other women with cancer through being a Peer Support Volunteer. We look forward to them joining the Counterpart team after their training in August and September 2021.



Volunteers carry out a range of roles including giving peer support and helping to promote Counterpart at events

Bridget VOLUNTEER STORY



After my breast cancer diagnosis in 2008 I hunted for information and, importantly, connection with others. Counterpart (then BreaCan) came up as the place to go, with a library, women who knew their stuff, and the classic tea and biscuit (homemade in those days). Then there were all the information sessions and best, for me, the Feel Good exercise group. Impressed by the Peer Support Volunteer training course, I put my hand up as soon as I was eligible. I leapt at the chance to share what I'd gained through Counterpart.

Volunteering makes me feel I've made a difference, however large or small. I can see how we fill a gap: women can often talk more freely with us about their experience than they can with friends and family. This seems to help them sort out their real feelings and to deal with shock and grief.

During the pandemic our conversations often moved into the practicalities of managing treatment under lockdown and other restrictions. I remember one woman ending up laughing because her cancer was ranking below the challenges of having several children at home instead of school and elderly parents needing care just down the road.

Of course, I have been missing the face-to-face conversations with women in hospital (the Bridge of Support program) and the magic of women getting together at What's On sessions in the Resource Centre. But online and on the phone, we've kept going.

Nurturing, informative, empowering, are words that come to mind when I think of Counterpart. I love being a Peer Support Volunteer for Counterpart. After my first diagnosis of breast cancer in 2007, and a reoccurrence in 2017, I wanted to volunteer in an organisation that has a knowledge-based feminist framework and demonstrates a commitment to women who have been diagnosed with breast cancer. To offer support to others.

Speaking with someone who has had a similar experience and knows of the sense of aloneness, scariness and of the need to get access to information can be powerful and grounding. I am always touched by the phone calls I have with women. During the lockdowns women have talked about how the pandemic has made things harder to manage.

Women always say thank you and that they appreciate the connection with others who have 'been there', albeit recognising our experiences are different but oh so similar.

'Sometimes it is hard, and it is good to know you are not alone.'

Evelyn VOLUNTEER STORY



Our staff



Fiona McRae
Manager



Kellie Holland
Team Leader Operations and
Volunteer Coordinator



Katherine Bradstreet
Communications Coordinator



Lauren Ferris
Digital Resources Coordinator



Rebecca Harraghy
Administration Officer
Acting Communications Coordinator
(October 2020 to July 2021)



Wendy Pullan
Program Coordinator and Bridge
of Support VCCC Coordinator



Linda Rehill
Program and Resources Coordinator



Jan Savage
Service Expansion Project Coordinator



Ada Castle
Casual Programs Coordinator



Lieve De Clercq
Casual Programs Coordinator



Louise Knell
Casual Programs Coordinator



Mary Macheras-Magias
Casual Projects Coordinator

Helen (Counterpart Volunteer)
Dianne Hill (CEO, Women's Health Victoria)
Fiona McRae (Manager, Counterpart)

Farewells

Greta (Counterpart Volunteer) until December 2020
Janice (Counterpart Volunteer) until May 2021

Counterpart Advisory Group

Christine Evely (Chair)
Monique Baldacchino
Danielle Carpenter
Liz Dax
Carmel McCarthy
Alison Murphy
Bernadette Zappa
Trish F (from May 2021, Counterpart Volunteer)

Our supporters

Thank you to all the people and organisations who have supported us in 2020–2021. You make it possible for us to continue to connect, support and inform women with breast or a gynaecological cancer in Victoria to live well.

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Dr Shirley Wong
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Presenters

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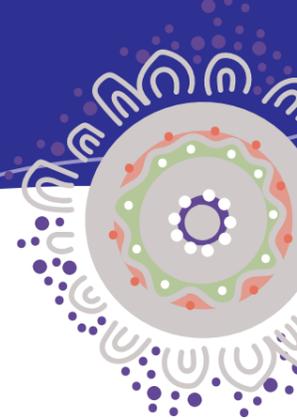
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Project funding

Pink Affair



COUNTERPART

Women supporting women with cancer

 1300 781 500  info@counterpart.org.au  counterpart.org.au

Counterpart Resource Centre



Level 5, Queen Victoria Women's Centre
210 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne 3000

Postal address

GPO Box 1066, Melbourne 3001

Hours of operation

Monday 10am–5pm
Wednesday 10am–5pm
Thursday 10am–5pm

Peer support from 10am–2pm
on these days (closed public holidays)

October 2021

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Women's Health Victoria acknowledges and pays our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the land that our offices are situated on, the peoples of the Kulin Nation. As a statewide organisation, we also acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters across Victoria. We pay our respects to them, their cultures and their Elders past and present.

We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded and that we are beneficiaries of stolen land and dispossession, which began over 200 years ago and continues today.



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Artist acknowledgment

Artist: Madison Connors
Yorta Yorta, Dja Dja
Wurrung, Gamilaroi

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