

## 35. Relationship with other Relatives or Friends

When faced with a crisis or uncertainty, people turn to their family and friends for support. This natural tendency occurs whether one is three years old, forty-three or eighty-three. Other people's reactions to cancer, however, vary considerably and often not in a way the patient would have predicted. Some people, even close friends and family, avoid the patient because they are uncomfortable not knowing what to say or because they are frightened by the illness itself for some reason. Others, however, may surprise the patient by being hugely and unexpectedly supportive.

Friends and family are frequently as distressed and shocked by illness as the patient themselves. Consequently patients can find themselves providing as much support as they receive. Other people's attempts at being supportive can be particularly unhelpful if patients are left feeling that their loved ones have minimised the seriousness of the cancer or been overly positive (e.g. insisting on 'positive thinking').

### How can I manage this situation?

Most of the concerns that you have about other people's reactions are probably perfectly normal. The disappointing reactions of others are often not directly to do with you – people commonly feel uncertain or awkward; not knowing quite the 'right thing' to say or do.

### Telling other people about your cancer

One of the most difficult things about being ill is the need to tell friends and family about the illness. It can be so difficult to talk about cancer that you may think, 'Why should I bother?' or, 'Why is it worth talking about what's going on if it makes you and your friends feel uncomfortable? But talking can help you cope with any uncertainties or difficulties that may lie ahead. It can give you support, and can help you develop some control over your situation. Although some of your friends and family will find it difficult to talk about your cancer, the best way to overcome their fears is by talking to them. This is not always easy. People often feel they don't know where to start, but the following tips might be helpful:

- **Try to get the setting right.** Make sure the television is turned off, the door is closed, you are both sitting comfortably and you can both see each other's face easily.
- **Introduce the subject gradually.** Rather than just saying you have cancer straight away, you could say something like, 'This is going to be difficult, but I need to tell you something'.
- **Tell them in the way that feels best for you.** There is no easy or 'right' way to tell other people that you have cancer. Sometimes it is easier to give the news over the telephone, through a letter or by email rather than face-to-face. For some people this might be the only option if you're a long distance away.
- **Ask what they already know.** If you think your relative or friend knows some of what has been happening, then it can be useful to ask them to tell you what they already know so you don't have to repeat information. You could say, 'You probably know some of this already, so if you tell me what you know, then I can add to it'.
- **Give the information in small chunks.** Start with a few sentences and check every now and then that the other person understands what you're saying before you carry on. You can ask things like, 'Does that make sense?' or, 'Is that clear?'
- **There will often be silences – don't be put off by them.** You, or your relative or friend, may sometimes find that you don't know what to say. Just sitting together in the same room can often say more than any words. If you find that a silence makes you feel uncomfortable, the easiest way to break it is with simple questions such as, 'What are you thinking about?'
- **Say what you need to say.** When you tell someone close to you that you have a serious illness, they may feel very upset. You may want to be positive and cheerful to make them feel better. This is fine if your situation looks okay. But if you're really worried about the future, don't hide this from them to protect their feelings. They'll want to know so they can support you.
- **Be truthful.** The truth may be painful for your relative or friend but it's better for them to know the truth than find out the seriousness of your situation later on, which can lead to them feeling hurt. Be honest if you if things seem uncertain, if it's difficult to know whether your treatment will be successful, or if you are not feeling the way other people seem to think you are. Your honesty will help them understand your situation and support you better, and they will not feel you have held back the truth from them.

- ***Don't be afraid to ask for help with telling others.*** After telling someone close to you about your cancer, it's normal to feel you need more time before you're up to talking about it with other relatives or friends. You may want to ask someone you've told if they can let others know your news.
- ***Prepare for social situations that worry you.*** People sometimes find themselves avoiding going out in case they have to see and speak to someone – try to develop a formula of words to help you prepare for and manage these situations.

### **Responding to other people**

Some people feel unable to cope with their own emotions, and may tend to avoid difficult situations such as talking about cancer. So your friends might prefer to stay away from you, rather than accept that they have strong emotions that they are struggling to deal with, and this can feel hurtful and disappointing. Here are some tips for dealing with this situation:

- ***Always try to respond to your relative or friend's feelings.*** If you are good at guessing how people feel, it can be helpful to identify your friend's emotion and what caused it. This can be quite simple, such as, '*When I talk about the cancer you look really upset*' or, '*It looks as though you get very scared when you come here*'.
- ***Don't be afraid to say how you feel too.*** '*I think both of us are finding this awful*' or, '*I know you're worried about what could happen and so am I*'. The more aware you both are of each other's feelings, the better the communication will be.

### **Resolving conflicts**

When dealing with cancer, people are often worried and nervous, and conflict is common. Here are some ideas to help you manage disagreements and the feelings caused by them:

- ***Try to describe your feelings rather than just acting on them.*** For example, you could say that you feel angry rather than start shouting. Reflect on your previous difficulties.
- ***Try to think*** about what the other person may be going through and be prepared to give much more without receiving.
- ***Try to acknowledge emotions*** whether they are yours or the other person's.
- ***If you can't agree on a particular issue, you can 'agree to disagree'. Avoid picking.***
- ***Talk about the issue with someone else.*** You may find a solution by seeing things from a different point of view.
- ***Try to see the other person's side of the argument.*** They may feel bad about the conflict too, and understanding this may help you feel less angry.
- ***Write down some of your feelings.*** This can help to put things in perspective.