

37. Sadness and Depression

It is very common to feel sad and low in spirits after a diagnosis of cancer. Sadness is a very normal emotion in the face of something that has been lost, such as the loss of the ability to enjoy certain aspects of life, or the loss of the certainty of one's health, or perhaps even the plans one had made for the future. The source of the sadness will vary from person to person. Depression is a word that professionals use to describe very deep sadness that the person concerned feels unable to shift or overcome. During the course of treatment it is common for patients to become emotionally and physically exhausted. This often looks like, and in fact can lead to, sad and depressive feelings. The important thing is not whether a person is sad or depressed (there is no physical test to tell the difference), but what is *causing* these feelings and what can be done about it.

Some patients feel a huge pressure from their family and friends to be happy and cheerful and consequently feel guilty if they feel sad and anxious and therefore try to hide these feelings, thus making the situation worse. This pressure to be positive at all times sometimes comes from the patient who doesn't want to cause further distress to the people they care about, but sometimes it comes from friends and family who can't bear to face up to the very difficult feelings the patient is having. There is also a wrong, but widely held view in society that one can only beat cancer by 'being positive'. Whatever the situation, if people feel unable to express their feelings openly and honestly, and instead hold them in, they are more likely to feel sad and depressed.

Typical features of sadness and depression include:

- Hopelessness which is pervasive, with a sense of despair
- Loss of the ability to enjoy things
- Withdrawal – the person unusually prefers to spend lots of time alone
- Helplessness or passivity
- Loss of interest in day-to-day activities
- Feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt (not simply blaming themselves for being a burden)
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Suicidal thoughts or a wish for hastened death
- The person feels stuck in their feelings and nothing they do seems to help

When assessing someone's mood, consider the...

- *Severity* of the emotions (how desperate are the feelings?)
- *Duration* of the distress (does the patient feel stuck with their feelings?)
- *Complexity* of the issues underlying the sadness
- *Meaningfulness* of the feelings to the patient (do they make sense to them?)
- *Resources* available to the individual (how much confiding support is available?)

How can I manage my feelings?

- Having things to look forward to and things to achieve are vitally important to your mood and to your sense of well-being. For example, has the treatment taken over your life and forced out things to look forward to or things you can achieve?
- Goal setting can be helpful – consider making a commitment to an achievable daily goal such as having a brief

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- Chat with a friend or family member, taking some exercise (e.g. a short walk), doing something pleasurable like having a bath, going to a film with a friend, etc.?
- Talking through your feelings with someone you trust may sound obvious but it can be very helpful, provided they are a good listener. Alternatively think about seeking professional help so that you can understand your feelings better and resolve them.
- Keep a journal to write down your feelings as they occur, or at the end of the day. This very private way of expressing and making sense of your feelings has been shown by research to be an effective way of managing stress.
- A gentle form of exercise each day, such as yoga or walking, often helps with feelings of sadness and depression. It can also help with associated problems such as sleep problems and fatigue.
- If you or your family or friends think you may be depressed, please speak to your GP or tell your oncology doctor or clinical nurse specialist. They may be able to refer you to a counselling service or psychiatry service for help with your feelings.
- If you are feeling suicidal, please tell a member of your healthcare team (GP, hospital doctor, nurse, radiographer, etc.) today so that they can arrange appropriate support for you to anyone affected by a cancer diagnosis. You do not need a doctor's referral. See local and national resources below

How to handle your emotions:

Many people struggle to cope with their feelings when they have cancer. Dr Maggie Watson, Psychologist at UCL suggests how you can learn to take control.

Being told you have cancer is devastating: feeling anger, fear and guilt is quite common. Some people worry even more that negative thinking will cause the cancer to return. But there is no scientific evidence that positive attitudes help you live longer. Everyone has their emotional ups and downs – don't give yourself the added pressure of trying to be positive all the time.

These days, medical progress means that more and more people living longer with cancer and more people being cured. Learning to cope and get on with life is important.

How your emotions are affected

Realising how your illness and treatment affects your emotions is a vital first step. Most people with cancer feel worried or low from time to time, which may lead to irritability, sleeping badly and losing interest in everyday activities. It can also result in:

- Poor concentration and memory (under stress, your thoughts may be hard to organise)
- Tiredness and lethargy (worry and tension use up a lot of your energy)
- Depression (the feeling that worries are taking over your life can lead to despair)
- Hopelessness (you may feel the future looks black, and that you are unable to cope)

But despite these feelings, there are practical measures you can take to make you feel that you are in control of your life and your emotions.

The way you think

You may already be aware that the way you think has an important effect on the way you feel and what you are able to do. Pessimistic thought such as, 'I can't cope' or 'I feel terrible' can make you even more anxious and unhappy. Some of your thoughts will be based on what you know but others will probably be guesswork and you may be jumping to conclusions that paints things blacker than they are.

Challenge negativity

Try to see if you can find another way of looking at things. It may be useful to think of what someone else would say to you if you told them your pessimistic thoughts. Or you can try to challenge those thoughts, by telling yourself one of the following: 'I'm deliberately going to change the way I feel', 'I have to stop jumping to conclusion', 'I have to stop thinking in all-or-nothing or black-or-white ways', 'I've coped before by doing (a specific activity)... I can do it again'.

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

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Local Resources:

<p>Counselling Service The Fern Centre North Devon District Hospital</p>	<p>Jess French, Lead Macmillan Cancer Care Counsellor Tel: 01271 334472 (ext. 5672) Email: ndht.cancercarescounseling@nhs.net Web: http://www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk/ Self-referral or through your CNS or keyworker</p>
<p>HOPE programme — self-management course for cancer patients over 6 consecutive weekly sessions, each of 2.5hrs https://www.northdevonhealth.nhs.uk/services/living-with-and-beyond-cancer/</p>	<p>Jess French contact as above or use the self –referral form on the NDDH website</p>
<p>Relate The Tarka Clinic, Paiges Lane Barnstaple EX31 1EF Tel: 0300 772 9681</p>	<p>Relationship advice/Family counselling/Sex therapy</p>

National Resources:

<p>Macmillan Cancer Support Line www.macmillan.org.uk Call 0808 808 00 00 — Monday – Friday 9am—8pm</p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. Please note that calls to this number are not free when made from outside the UK. If you are calling from outside of the UK call on +44 207 091 2230</p>
<p>Marie Curie Support Line — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support</p>	<p>Calls are free of charge from all consumer landlines and mobile phones plus all mobile networks. The Support Line is open 8am – 6pm Monday to Friday and 11am – 5pm Saturday</p>
<p>NHS BETA https://apps.beta.nhs.uk/category/mental_health/</p>	<p>Digital tool to help manage and improve your health</p>
<p>Samaritans https://www.samaritans.org/</p>	<p>When people feel listened to, it can save a life ‘, confidential support for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair Tel: 116 123(free 24hr helpline)</p>

Other Resources :

<p>Macmillan Booklets:</p>	<p>Talking about cancer—MAC11646</p>
	<p>How are you feeling? The emotional effects of cancer—MAC11593</p>
	<p>Talking with someone who has cancer— MAC11631</p>
<p>Books</p>	<p>Facing the storm: using CBT, Mindfulness and Acceptance to build up resilience when your world is falling apart– Ray Owen(2011) published by Routledge</p>
	<p>The Mindful Way Through Depression—Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn(2007) published by Guilford Press</p>
	<p>Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world—Mark Williams and Danny Penman(2011) published by Piatkus</p>
	<p>Cancer in Context A practical guide to supportive care—James Brennan(2004) published by Oxford University Press</p>