

43. Guilt

Wanting to find a cause for things that happen to us is part of our instinctive need to learn from experience, so it is little wonder that many patients ask themselves the question “*Why me?*”. The trouble is that these internal thoughts and questions can lead to anger, resentment, blaming others, or sometimes guilt about the perceived causes and consequences of cancer. For instance, it may be that the person feels they have in some way brought the illness upon themselves (e.g. smoking or sunbathing). The patient may also blame themselves for causing upset and distress to loved ones, or might worry that they have become a burden to others, either emotionally or financially. Each person will have their own specific reasons for their feelings of guilt.

Many people attribute cancer to stressful events in their recent past, such as a bereavement though, despite its intuitive appeal, there is little scientific evidence linking stressful life events with cancer or disease progression. Likewise, despite claims that personality can contribute to the development of breast cancer, the evidence strongly suggests that it does not. Some people attribute the cause of their cancer to a form of punishment, or divine retribution, for past misdeeds. For others, cancer may be a catalyst to re-examine guilty feelings from the past, but in any event, ruminating about such causes can result in regret, guilt and despair. Guilt, of course, extends to behaviour that may indeed have contributed to the cancer (smoking being the obvious example) so it is important to avoid contributing to, or reinforcing, any sense of self-blame.

Family and friends of a person with cancer might also feel guilty for a number of reasons. For example, they might feel very conscious of their own good health while their family member is unwell, or they might feel that they cannot offer as much support as they would ideally like to. They could also feel guilt when they become anxious, stressed or impatient, or when they don't believe they can provide the care and understanding that is needed.

How can I manage feelings of guilt?

Guilt about impact on others

- If you feel guilt about the impact of your illness on family and friends, try to talk to them about how you feel and find out what they truly feel. Some reassurance from them may ease your sense of guilt. Being open about your feelings can bring you closer together. For example, if the shoe were on the other foot would you perceive your loved one as being a burden?
- If you have been feeling guilty about some aspect of your life for a long time, is there anything that you

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would wish to do about it at this point in your life? Is it possible you could address the issues you feel guilty about?

Guilt about the diagnosis of cancer

- Cancer is a complex disease, arising from many different factors in the environment and our genes. No single factor can completely explain any cancer; most of them are out of anyone's control.
- It may help to talk about your feelings with someone you trust, in order to get an objective and realistic free, perspective. But if you don't want to share your feelings, try not to blame yourself – ultimately, this is very unlikely to help you, those you care about, or the situation in general. Consider practical ways (e.g. healthy eating, relaxation, gentle exercise etc.) in which you can contribute to your treatment and recovery – this could help you to assume a greater sense of control over your health and wellbeing.
- If your feelings of guilt persist, you might find it helpful to discuss them with a counsellor. Several counselling services are available offering please see local and national resources for information
- It may be helpful to join a support group where you can talk to people who may have experienced similar problems to confidential sessions to anyone affected by a cancer diagnosis. Please ask your clinical nurse specialist or keyworker for details of a support group suitable for you.

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

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- Resources/Information

Local Resources:

<p>Cancer Care Counselling Service The Fern Centre North Devon District Hospital Raleigh park Barnstaple Devon EX32 4JB</p>	<p>Jess French, Lead Macmillan Cancer Care Counsellor Tel: 01271 334472 (ext. 5672) Email: jess.french@nhs.net Web: https://overandabove.org.uk/fern-centre/ Self referral or through your CNS or keyworker</p>
<p>Talkworks talkworks.dpt.nhs.uk 109 Boutport Street Barnstaple EX31 1TA</p>	<p>Offering effective therapies for people 18+. Self refer by phone or online without having to visit your GP. For more info please visit the website or telephone 0300 555 3344</p>

National Resources:

<p>NHS 111</p>	<p>Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.</p>
<p>NHS Website</p>	<p>Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing.</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>
<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>Macmillan on-line Community</p>	<p>Online support— to share experiences or vent your emotions find others who understand—join today!</p>
<p>Marie Curie Support Line — Living with a terminal illness and looking for support www.mariecurie.org.uk/help/support/marie-curie-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>

Other Resources :

<p>Macmillan Booklets:</p>	<p>Cancer and relationships— MAC17643_E01_N</p>
	<p>Managing the symptoms of cancer MAC11671</p>
	<p>How are you feeling? PDF— MAC11593_E05_N</p>
	<p>Planning ahead for end of life—MAC13616_E03_N</p>
	<p>Your feeling after cancer treatment- MAC12517_E05_N</p>
	<p>Worrying about cancer coming back— MAC14215_E03_N</p>