

44. Hopelessness

Having events to look forward to and things to achieve is what motivates and structures our lives. Indeed, much of our sense of our identity is bound up with our own personal our life story, and our 'life trajectory' which includes goals and rewards in the future. Goals are vital to our emotional well-being. Having a 'wished-for' future is one component of hope. No matter what prognosis has been given, cancer forces people to examine the possibility that they may not live as long as they had assumed they would. Many people react to their diagnosis by preparing for the possibility of their death, closing things down rather than making plans for the future.

Furthermore, cancer treatments and the illness itself severely challenge people's ability to stay involved with activities that would normally motivate them. Fatigue, pain, nausea, not to mention all the hospital appointments, make it difficult to plan things for the future. Consequently, people with cancer often become less involved with activities they would normally find appealing, and they cease to make plans for their immediate and longer-term future. But without the motivation of future pleasure and achievement, people can find themselves lacking any sense of direction and with excessive time in which to ruminate and worry.

The other main source of hopelessness is when people have had repeated disappointments, leading them to expect nothing but further disappointments in the future. Consequently the person may prefer to live without plans for fear of having their hopes dashed once again. They may worry that if they look forward to something they are merely tempting fate, and that it will be snatched away from them again. These are common and understandable reactions but they also contain dangers. Without a sense of future, and without goals, people are more likely to feel hopeless and depressed. Everyone needs hope: buying a lottery ticket does not mean you necessarily believe you will win. Finally, sometimes people abandon long-standing ambitions and replace them with new, more personally meaningful ones; this is a form of healthy personal growth.

If someone's cancer is incurable they may be worrying that at some point the health services will simply leave them to die without further support. This fear of abandonment is more common than it sounds so if this fear is revealed the patient should be reassured that healthcare will never abandon them and that palliative care services are there to ensure that people are comfortable and well supported until the end of their lives.

How can I manage these feelings?

- It is important to stay involved with activities that provide you with a sense of achievement and/or Pleasure with pleasant things to look forward to. People feel most fulfilled when they are engaged in activities which are naturally motivating (e.g. creative arts and crafts, work etc.).
- Try to see your cancer treatment as a necessary chore that must be fitted into your otherwise busy life, rather than something which becomes the dominant feature—try not let your treatments/illness define you.

44. Hopelessness continued

- Goal setting is very helpful – consider making a commitment to an achievable daily goal such as having a brief chat with a friend or family member, taking some exercise, doing something pleasurable like having a bath, watching a DVD, etc. Also make plans for things to look forward to and achieve over the weeks and months to come.
- Hopelessness is a core risk factor for depression and/or suicidal feelings so be sure to consider these (See Sadness and Depression elsewhere in this directory). These feelings can always be resolved but may take specialist help. Consider a referral to a counsellor or the palliative care services.
- It may be helpful to join a support group where you can talk to people who may have experienced similar problems to yourself—contact the Fern Centre.
- You might find it helpful to discuss your feelings with a counsellor. Several counselling services are available offering free, confidential sessions, to anyone affected by a cancer diagnosis. You do not need a doctor's referral. Please contact the Fern Centre and the Cancer Care Counsellors—see below for details.

Living With and Beyond Cancer Information Sheet

44. Hopelessness - Resources/Information

Local Resources:

<p>Cancer Care Counselling Service Within The Fern Centre Web: https://overandabove.org.uk/fern-centre/ Self referral or through your CNS or keyworker</p>	<p>Jess French, Lead Macmillan Cancer Care Counsellor Tel: 01271 334472 (ext. 5672) Email: ndht.cancercarecounselling@nhs.net</p>
<p>The Fern Centre North Devon District Hospital Raleigh Park Barnstaple Devon EX32 4JB</p>	<p>Ask questions ,share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support , advice and information for cancer patients and their carers. Web: https://overandabove.org.uk/fern-centre/</p>
<p>Talkworks www.talkworks.dpt.nhs.net 109 Boutport Street Barnstaple EX31 1TA Helpline : 0300 555 3344 or online form</p>	<p>Psychological support for 18+years. Helping to manage emotional difficulties that often go hand in hand with experiencing a long-term physical health condition.</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 with your health and wellbeing.</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>
<p>Samaritans Tel: 116123 (free 24hrs helpline) Website: 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</p>

Other Resources :

<p>Macmillan Booklets:</p>	<p>Managing the symptoms of cancer MAC11671</p>
	<p>How are you feeling? PDF— MAC11593_E05_N</p>
	<p>Understanding chemotherapy MAC11619_E15</p>