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Living With Cancer

This factsheet covers:

- Diagnosis
- Understanding your illness
- Dealing with feelings
- Telling friends and family
- Telling children
- Life afterwards
- A positive outlook

DIAGNOSIS

When cancer is diagnosed it is often accompanied by a wave of emotions, starting with shock, and possibly going through fear, denial, anger, blame, and guilt. You may face a great deal of uncertainty about your future which can make you feel frustrated and depressed. You may also have concerns about how your diagnosis will affect family and friends.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ILLNESS

It can be useful to find out as much as possible about your condition, so that you know what to expect or what you can do improve your outlook. There are many sources of information out there, but be careful when searching the net, as the information you find may be from a less trustworthy or reliable source and may make recommendations that are inappropriate for your specific condition. A good place to start is to write a list of questions and take these with you when you see the doctor or specialist. You might also want to take a friend with you, as you may find it difficult to take in all the information.

These are just a few questions you might want to ask:

- What affect will the cancer have?
- What are the treatment options?
- What are the side effects of treatment, short term and long term?
- What alternative therapies are available to support the medical treatment?
- Will I need to take time off work?
- Where can I get advice about my financial situation if I need to take time off work?
- Are there any local support groups?
- Are there any local support groups for partners or family members?
- Are there any dietary options that can help?
- Is it ok to exercise?

DEALING WITH FEELINGS

It can help to relieve anxiety if you talk about your concerns with a friend, family member, health professional or someone else with your illness or condition. You may also want to consider finding a support group or an online community.

Learning how to relax will help to ease stress and possibly some symptoms too, for example, through an absorbing activity or by learning relaxation techniques or doing gentle exercise like yoga.

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TELLING FRIENDS AND FAMILY

The following tips should help you to prepare to tell your friends and family.

- Decide who you need to tell and what you want to tell them.
- It can be useful to think beforehand about what you'd like to say.
- How much you say and what you say may depend on who you are telling, for example what you tell your friends will be different from what you tell your family.
- It might help you to write a few notes and refer to these so you don't miss anything out.

An example of what you might want to say:

- Explain the basic facts: What type of cancer you have, what stage it is at
- Provide reassurance that there is a treatment plan in place: What treatment you are going to have, when the treatment is going to start
- Provide details of support and information resources that they can access if they want to
- It is not necessary to explain every single detail at first. Remember they will be shocked too and will need time to take in the news.

Choose your time and your place carefully — make sure that you are somewhere private where you will not be interrupted. Don't be afraid to ask for any support you need from those you are telling.

TELLING CHILDREN

Telling children that a parent has cancer can be extremely distressing for any parent. Parents will often worry about their children's reaction to the news, and be concerned about the impact in the long term. Children are very perceptive and will sense that something is wrong, telling them nothing can therefore increase their anxiety.

The following will help you to manage the situation with more confidence.

- Consider who should tell them, you may want to tell them yourself or may feel that you are unable to. In which case a partner or close relative could tell them whilst you are present. You might also want a doctor or nurse to be present when you tell children so that they can ask questions that you may have difficulty answering.
- Think about how much information you want to tell them. What you tell them will depend very much on their age, young children will need simple explanations, but you might want to share a bit more with older children. Your doctor or nurse can advise you on what might be appropriate to tell children.
- Allow children time to talk about how they are feeling. But don`t pressure them into sharing their feelings, let them talk to you when they feel ready.
- Encourage them to ask you any questions they may have. Children, especially younger children, may ask the same questions over and over again and it is important that your answers remain consistent. Children often feel guilty when a parent is ill and it is important to reassure them repeatedly that is not their fault.
- Be positive, but don't make promises you can`t keep, instead say "I think...", "I hope..." or "I`ll try..."
- Let children know about any practical changes as soon as you can, e.g. children may need to spend some time with a friend or family member when their parent is having treatment.

You may also want to talk to your child`s teacher. It can be helpful to let them know how much you have told your child and how you have explained it to them. You may also want to ask the teacher to let you know if there is a change in your child's behaviour.

LIFE AFTERWARDS

Once you've had treatment it can still take a long time to get used to the way you feel about your illness. It can be very hard to believe that the cancer might not come back, for example, or you may never be told you are 'cured'. Everyone copes with this uncertainty in a different way.

A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

One of the things that people living with cancer are often encouraged to do is to 'be positive'. This may be hard when you're feeling anxious or low. However, being positive doesn't mean you have to be cheerful and optimistic all the time. Acknowledging when you feel upset or frightened can be a sign of strength and courage in facing up to an uncertain future. It's more a matter of balancing the bad with the good and not letting the negative side overwhelm you.

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