

A practical guide to living with and after cancer

TALKING WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS CANCER



About this booklet

This booklet aims to help you talk with and support a relative or friend who has cancer.

Being told that someone you care about has cancer is often a big shock. You may want to help, but don't know how. You may think there are things you should say or do to make it easier for the person with cancer. But you might not be sure what these things are.

You may have thoughts such as, 'What if I say the wrong thing?', 'How do I talk to her?' and 'I don't want to hurt him'. Many people feel like this.

This booklet includes suggestions on how to:

- be a good listener
- talk about cancer
- offer practical help.

If you find this booklet helpful, you could pass it on to your family and friends. They may also want information to help them support someone with cancer.

How to use this booklet

In this booklet we've included advice and tips from people with cancer, their friends and family. These are from The Source (source.macmillan.org.uk), a website where people affected by cancer can share practical tips on supporting someone. We hope you find these helpful.

Further information

If you'd like to discuss this information, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, Monday–Friday, 9am–8pm. If you're hard of hearing, you can use textphone **0808 808 0121**, or Text Relay. For non-English speakers, interpreters are available. Alternatively, visit **[macmillan.org.uk](https://www.macmillan.org.uk)**

We have a booklet called **When someone close to you has cancer**, which explains the feelings you may have while supporting someone with cancer. If you have cancer yourself, our booklet **Talking about cancer** has useful tips on how to talk to others about your cancer.

We have listed some other useful organisations at the end of this booklet (see pages 73–77).

Getting support

When someone you care about has cancer, it can affect you too. So we've included information about looking after yourself and getting the support you need (see pages 63–65).

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Your data and the cancer registry

When you are diagnosed with cancer in the UK, some information about you and your health is collected in a cancer registry. This is used to plan and improve health and care services. Your hospital will usually give this information to the registry automatically. There are strict rules to make sure the information is kept safely and securely. It will only be used for your direct care or for health and social care planning and research.

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions. If you do not want your information included in the registry, you can contact the cancer registry in your country. You can find more information at [macmillan.org.uk/cancerregistry](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancerregistry)



THE BENEFITS OF TALKING

Why talking is important

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Why talking is important

When life is hard, people often feel the need to talk about what is bothering them. Talking releases stress and helps us feel better. Finding the words to describe events and feelings can help to make sense of them. And, being listened to and heard can help reassure someone with cancer that they are not going through difficult times alone.

People with strong emotional support tend to adjust better to the changes cancer can bring to their lives. If someone doesn't have anyone to talk to, they are more likely to be anxious and depressed. Support from family and friends can make a real difference.

If someone you know has cancer, you may feel you don't know what to say or worry you'll say the wrong thing. But if you are open and sensitive to their feelings and respect their wishes, you won't go far wrong.

There is no perfect phrase that is the 'right' thing to say. Often the most important things are just listening to the person and keeping in touch. Remember, your relative or friend is still the same person they have always been.

'Most people find talking about cancer very difficult. But for fear of saying the wrong thing, they say nothing and communication stops. This is very upsetting. So if you're not sure what to say, just say hello. But don't be a stranger!'

Chris

Some people worry that if they talk to their relative or friend about the cancer or its treatment, they will make them even more distressed. But talking about fear or distress does not generally make it worse. Often, talking can help.

'The most important way to support a loved one with cancer is simply to be there for them. Cancer can be very isolating. Treatment can go on for a long time, and the side effects and emotional impact can carry on long after treatment has finished.

Make sure your loved one doesn't feel forgotten with regular phone calls, emails or little treats in the post. Visits are also lovely, but check before you see your relative or friend in case they're not up to it. And, always make sure you are 100% healthy to reduce your loved one's risk of infection.'

Anikka



KEEPING IN TOUCH

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Different ways of keeping in touch

There are many ways to keep in touch and to let your relative or friend know they are important to you. These can include:

- visiting them
- sending notes, cards, texts and emails
- making phone calls
- talking to them on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

You can ask your relative or friend what they prefer.

During and after cancer treatment, people may have good days and bad days. There may be times when your relative or friend's energy levels are low. If they are having treatment or likely to be tired, try to keep phone calls and letters short. It's also good to call before you visit to ask if they are feeling well enough to see you.

Remember to be understanding if your relative or friend doesn't always feel able to see you or has to change plans at the last minute.

'When my friend has been in hospital, I text her often to ask how she is. She told me it's good to hear things like "Don't worry about replying" or "Get in touch when you can". This way, she doesn't feel the pressure to reply straight away.'

Libby

Keep sending invites

Remember to keep inviting your relative or friend to take part in social events and plans, just like you did before they had cancer. Even if they don't feel up to coming, it's always nice to be asked. Let them be the one to decide if they cannot make it.

'When I was going through chemotherapy, I was surprised to find that I generally felt OK. I was able to spend time with friends and go for coffee, dinner and even the occasional glass of wine on my "good days"!

If you have a friend who is going through chemotherapy, please don't forget about them. Keep sending them invites, as your plans may well fall on their "good day". Even if they have to decline, remember that being thought of still counts for a lot!'

Hannah

Notes and cards

Many people worry about what to write. But you don't have to come up with something deeply meaningful. If it's the first time you've written to your relative or friend since their diagnosis, acknowledge what's happened and let them know you care.

If you're struggling to find words, you could try something like:

- 'I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care.'
- 'I'm sorry to hear that you are going through this.'
- 'How are you doing?'
- 'If you would like to talk about it, I'm here.'
- 'I'll keep you in my thoughts.'

If your relative or friend has internet access, you may wish to send them an electronic card (eCard). An eCard is a digital greeting card or postcard which you can create and send online to someone's email address. We have a range of free eCards available on our website. Visit **ecards.macmillan.org.uk**

'Someone might not be up to a visit or a long phone call, but everyone loves seeing a letter on the doormat that isn't a bill or a pizza menu! If you're not sure what to say, just send them a picture that will make them smile and know that you're thinking of them.'

Rebecca

Gifts

These don't have to be expensive. It really is the thought that counts. Look for small, practical things your relative or friend may need or enjoy. Think about what might make their day a little better. Fun things that may make them laugh or smile are good too.

Examples of gifts you could buy include:

- magazines, DVDs, audio and easy-reading books
- soft bed socks
- toiletries such as lip balm, hand cream or body lotion
- favourite foods or snacks
- a special pillow or a heating pad
- photos of family members or friends.

'My closest friends sent me little gifts like toy rabbits to cuddle, hearts to hang on the wall, and hand cream to ease my dry skin. These gifts reminded me I was in their thoughts. Together, my friends kept me sane.'

Alison

Calling and messaging

Phone calls

Phone calls are a great way to stay in touch. Here are some tips:

- Call at times that work best for your relative or friend.
- Be aware that your relative or friend might be tired, so don't make the call too long.
- End the call by saying you'll be in touch soon and make a reminder for yourself about when to call again.

Text messages

Many people keep in touch with text messages. They are a good way of letting people know you're thinking of them and only take a few minutes to send.

When you write or text the person, let them know they don't need to reply straight away. You could say something like 'I want you to know I'm thinking of you, but don't feel you have to reply'. This way, you're not putting them under any pressure to respond.

Social media

Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter are popular ways of sharing thoughts, feelings and events with many people at one time. They can be a good way of keeping in touch, especially if the person you're supporting feels tired or unwell.

If you want to talk with your relative or friend about cancer on social media, consider using private messaging. They may not want to discuss this information in public.

Visits

It's very common for people with cancer to feel lonely and isolated. Try to spend time with your relative or friend. Being able to see them and hear their voice can often give you a better idea of how they are feeling. If your relative or friend wants to have an in-depth conversation about their feelings, this may be more likely to happen when you see each other face to face.

'My husband loves to have visitors, but many people don't realise how tiring this can be. Try to visit a poorly person often but be aware of how they are and keep it short. Offering to make the tea or coffee (instead of me) is also good as it shows an awareness of how tiring caring for someone can be.'

Susan



THE BENEFITS OF LISTENING

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Being a good listener

Most of us feel helpless when faced with cancer. However, you can often help someone just by listening to them and letting them talk. Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs the most.

Listening carefully is a skill that you can learn. It helps you be more supportive and understand better what your relative or friend needs. You can listen without feeling you have to have answers.

Finding out if the person wants to talk

It's not necessary to rush into talking about the illness. Sometimes it's enough just to listen and let the person with cancer talk when they are ready. Let them know that if they want to talk about the cancer, you are willing to listen.

Your relative or friend may just want to talk about ordinary things, such as TV programmes, sports events or what's been happening in your life. There's something very reassuring about everyday small talk. Sometimes people just want to enjoy a 'normal' conversation. This can help them to feel that cancer hasn't taken over every part of their life.

Follow their lead

You may be able to sense whether your relative or friend wants to talk. Listen to them carefully. If they tell you something about their cancer, ask them if they want to talk about it more. But let them decide if and when they want to have that conversation. If you're not sure, you can always ask 'Do you feel like talking?'.

If your relative or friend does want to talk to you about cancer, you may find it helpful to have a conversation about:

- what topics are okay to talk about
- how they will let you know if they don't want to talk about something
- what support you can offer that they will find helpful.

If your relative or friend doesn't want to talk about cancer or their feelings, try not to take this personally. It doesn't mean you have done anything wrong. There are times people choose not to talk about cancer. This may be because they don't feel it will be helpful for them or that they want a break from thinking about it. You can still help by listening and paying attention when they do choose to talk.

'My advice would be to just listen and be there when they want to talk. Remember, don't force them to speak. They will talk when they're ready.'

Jackie

How to listen

When your relative or friend is talking, it's important to give them your full attention. Here are some simple tips to follow.

Getting the setting right

Somewhere comfortable that offers privacy is best. Here are some things you can do to help:

- Switch off your mobile phone and other distractions, like the TV.
- Let them know you have time to sit and talk with them.
- Keep your eyes at the same level as them. Sitting down next to the person or at an angle to each other, rather than face on, usually helps to make the setting feel less intense.
- Sit close, but not too close. Sitting about 2–3 feet (60–90cm) away allows them personal space without being too far away to be able to talk intimately.
- Sit quietly – this will give the impression of calmness, even though you may not feel relaxed.

Show you are listening

Try to look at the person as you're listening, to show them they have your full attention. It's also good to nod, occasionally, and encourage the person to talk by making comments such as 'Hmmm', 'Uh-huh' or 'Yes'.

Check you've understood

Misunderstandings can happen if you assume that you know how the other person feels. Asking questions and giving feedback will help you check you've understood what they have said. It also shows that you are listening and trying to understand.

Questions you could ask include:

- 'Do you mean that...?'
- 'What did that feel like?'
- 'How do you feel now?'

It is also good to check what you've heard is right:

- 'What I'm hearing is...'
- 'It sounds like you're saying...'

Keep an open mind

Try to avoid talking while the other person is talking. Wait for them to stop speaking before you start. Don't get caught up with thinking about what you're going to say next. Listening is not the same as waiting to talk.

If your relative or friend tells you about their fears or worries, it's important to let them be sad or upset. It may be distressing for you to hear some of the things they say. However, it can really help them if you're able to stay and just listen while they talk.

See pages 47–52 for more information on coping with difficult emotions such as sadness or anger.

Respond with respect and understanding

It's good to be open and honest about your feelings. Here are some things to think about:

- Make time for both your feelings and your relative or friend's feelings (see pages 47–52 on coping with difficult feelings).
- Give your opinion respectfully, but be aware your relative or friend may have a different opinion (see page 34 on giving advice).
- Treat the other person the way you think they would want to be treated.

Breaks in the conversation

If someone stops talking, it might mean they're thinking about something painful or sensitive. Wait with them for a little while and then ask them if they want to talk about it. Don't rush – it's okay to wait until they feel ready to talk again.

Sometimes just being there and touching their hand or putting an arm around their shoulder can help more than words. If they pull their hand away or look uncomfortable, you'll know this is a signal to give them space. But a touch may be just what's needed to help them talk. It shows that you care and want to support them.

'Letting someone share their thoughts and fears without interruption can be liberating.'

Tora

Respond to humour

If your relative or friend wants to use humour to help them cope, it's good to respond to this. But don't be the one to introduce humour into the conversation in case they don't find this helpful.

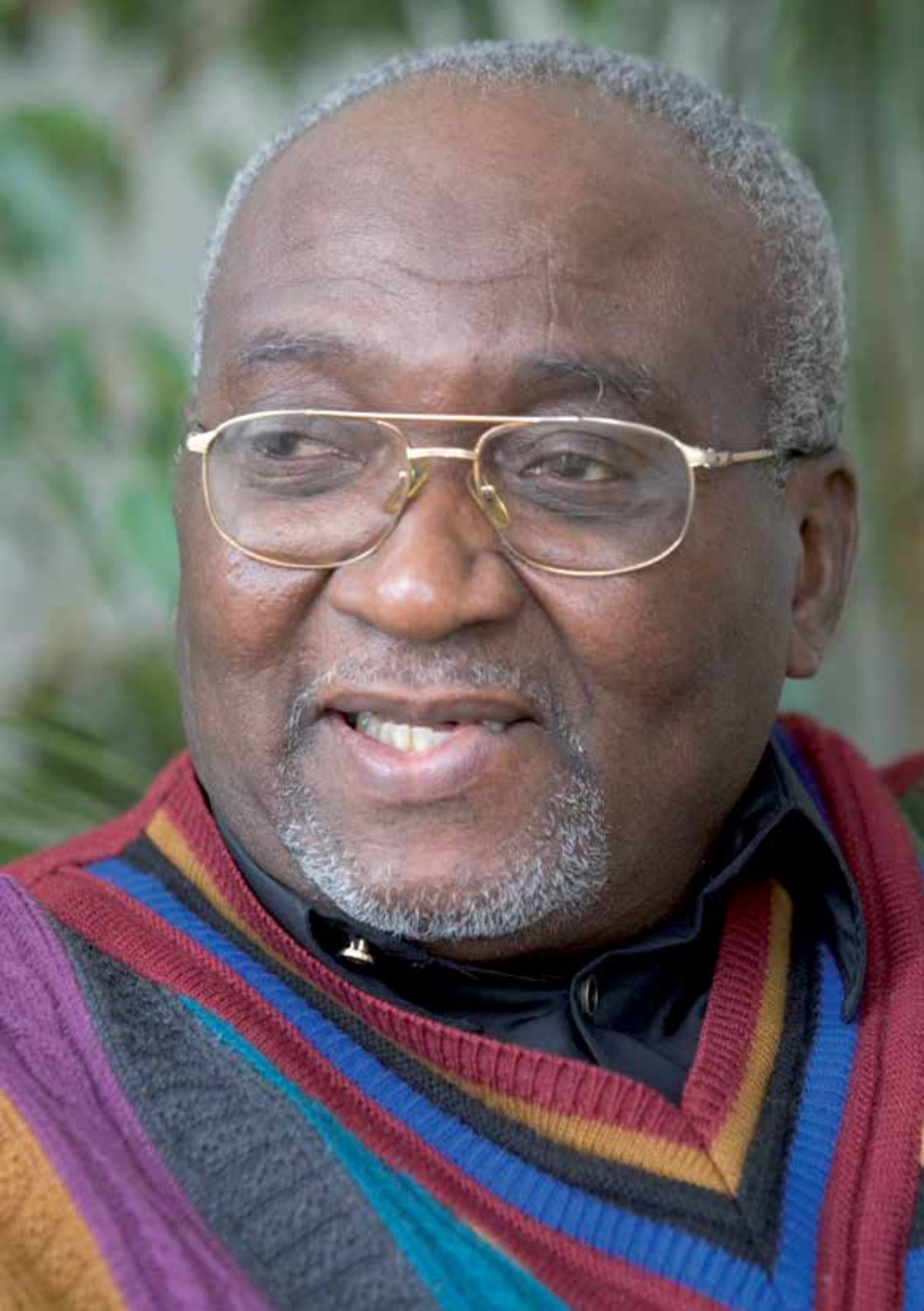
'Laughter brings people together, and shared tears of laughter can be both healing and bonding.'

George



Main points to think about

- Check you understand what the person is saying – if you're unsure what they mean or how they feel, just ask.
- Remember, each person's experience of cancer is different.
- Don't judge or offer advice that's not been asked for – if you must offer advice, pause to consider how helpful it will be.
- Respect the person's feelings and wishes.
- Respond to humour, if your relative or friend uses it.
- Be open to hearing what the person has to say.
- Show you are listening by nodding and making eye contact.
- Allow your relative or friend to be sad or upset.
- Acknowledge how difficult their situation must be.
- Make sure you look after yourself as well as the person with cancer.
- Seek support for yourself if you need to.





TRY NOT TO SAY THESE THINGS

What to avoid saying

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What to avoid saying

We know lots of people worry about saying the wrong thing. Understanding what may be unhelpful and why, may make you feel more confident about talking with your relative or friend.

In this section, we've included some examples of things people with cancer tell us they don't find helpful to hear and why. We have also suggested some alternatives.

If you have said one of these things, don't be hard on yourself. No one gets it right all of the time. The most important thing is you are trying to reach out and help. Don't let your anxiety about making a mistake make you afraid to offer support. Your relative or friend will appreciate that you are trying to help.

You can find more practical tips from people affected by cancer at **source.macmillan.org.uk**

'I know you'll be fine.'

It's very common for people with cancer to have fears and worries. But it can be hard to hear someone you care about talking about these things. You might want to make them feel better by telling them everything will be okay – but this often doesn't help.

Saying things like 'That's a good cancer to have' or 'At least you don't have to have chemotherapy' isn't usually helpful. The person with cancer may feel you don't understand the seriousness of what they are coping with.

What to do instead: Rather than playing down what someone is facing, listen to your relative or friend and let them speak freely about their feelings.

'Don't keep telling me "You'll be OK". I know you want me to, but you don't know if I will be or not. Ask "How are things with you right now?", or say something like "I hope for the best".'

Sharon

‘You are so strong.’

People often say this because they admire how the person with cancer is coping. But it’s not always helpful, as the person may feel under pressure to be brave or strong all the time. They may then feel they can’t admit to feeling down or ask for help when they are not coping so well.

What to say instead: You could tell them you understand they may have good days and bad days, and ask what support you can offer on those days.

‘People kept telling me how strong I was, probably because of my positive attitude and me putting on a “brave face”. But there were times when I felt anything but strong. I didn’t feel I could contact friends because, to them, I was this “strong lady” who could cope with anything.’

Catherine

‘You need to think positively.’

It’s not usually helpful to tell your relative or friend to think positively. No one can feel positive all the time. It’s normal for people to feel scared, angry, upset or down at times, especially when they’re dealing with cancer.

There is no evidence that positive thinking can make treatments more effective or stop cancer from coming back. If you suggest that being positive affects someone’s cancer, they may think they weren’t positive enough and it’s their fault if treatment doesn’t go well.

What to say instead: Ask them how they are feeling and be ready to hear what they tell you, even if it’s not all positive. Being able to express and accept feelings is the first step in coping with them.

‘When I was diagnosed, so many of my friends and workmates told me to be positive. It got to the point where I felt like saying if I don’t want to be positive, I won’t be!’

Beverley

‘My aunt had cancer.’

When your relative or friend brings up the subject of their cancer, avoid telling them about someone else’s cancer experience. Each person’s experience is different.

Treat your relative or friend as an individual. Try to focus on them rather than comparing them with anyone else.

What to say instead: You could encourage them to tell you more about the cancer and listen to what they say. That way they will know you are interested in hearing about their experience.

‘When I was diagnosed, so many people told me about their mum, dad, aunt or friend who died of cancer. Don’t say this! It’s really frightening and used to make me upset.’

Caroline

'You look really tired.'

Think before making remarks about someone's appearance. If someone looks tired or has lost weight, they probably know this already. Being told doesn't help them to feel any better.

What to say instead: It's generally best not to comment if someone isn't looking well. Let your relative or friend be the one to mention their appearance if they want to talk about it.

If your relative or friend looks well, and you want to tell them this, you could say something like, 'You look well, but how are you really feeling?'. This makes it clear you really want to know how they are and that you are not just assuming everything is fine.

'My dad was diagnosed last year and every time someone told him he'd lost weight, his face used to sink. I'm sure he knew he had lost weight, but people don't always realise this.'

Cheryl

‘You should try this diet I read about online.’

Think carefully before giving advice, especially about someone’s treatment. You may have your own ideas about what would help your relative or friend. But it’s worth pausing and asking yourself if your idea will really be helpful. You may want to tell them something that you think may help them feel better. But sometimes people facing a cancer diagnosis are overwhelmed with suggestions.

What to say instead: If you want to give advice but are not sure about it, you could say something like, ‘I wondered about this, but I don’t want to suggest it if it’s not the sort of thing you want’.

If you do make a suggestion, be ready to let it go if they don’t seem interested. Remember that your relative or friend may not always accept your advice or help. If they reject your suggestion, don’t take it personally. Their preferences may differ from yours. It could also be one way that they can stay in charge of their life, when other parts of it feel out of control.

It’s up to your relative or friend to make their own decisions about their treatment. Be ready to support their decision, even if it’s not the same one you think you would make.

‘Let the person learn about their cancer at their own pace. I have found out a lot about the type of cancer my brother has, to help me understand his progress. But I’m careful not to assume something he does not know yet, unless he asks me or tells me first.’

Anna

'If you need anything, just give me a call.'

This is a kind offer to make, but it's a bit vague. It's better to make real offers of help.

What to say instead: You could offer to collect the children from school, or drive your relative or friend to the hospital. Making a specific offer saves your friend trying to work out what you might be able to help with. It also shows you really want to help and aren't just being polite.

See pages 55–61 for more ideas on offering practical support.

'Something as simple as offering to help clean the house for an hour is really appreciated. Offer help, but make it specific.'

Jess

'It's great it's all over.'

Your relative or friend's treatment may be over but they will still need support.

When cancer treatment comes to an end, try not to assume your relative or friend can put it behind them straight away or feel happy about this. The end of treatment can often be an unexpectedly difficult time. It may be when people start coming to terms with what they have been through emotionally. They may be worried about the cancer coming back and miss the reassurance of regular contact with their cancer team. And they are often still coping with treatment side effects or adjusting to any permanent body changes.

What to do instead: Let your relative or friend know you are still available to listen to them when they want to talk.

'People sometimes said to me, "Bet you're glad that's over". After treatment had finished, they thought life would go back to how it used to be. But there were still scans, tests and side effects to deal with, not to mention the fear of relapse. Don't forget to ask how things are. It's a worrying time and the person is doing their best to find normality again.'

Michelle





WHAT YOUR RELATIVE OR FRIEND MAY BE FACING

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Uncertainty

We all like to know what's going to happen to us. It helps us feel secure about our future. Having this feeling of certainty is a basic human need. We all like to feel in control, but people with cancer often feel that this has been taken away from them. Their future may feel uncertain and they may not know what is going to happen to them. They may even talk about feeling out of control because they're going through an unpleasant situation.

You can help your relative or friend by simply acknowledging how difficult it must be to face this uncertainty. You could also help them by looking at some of the things they can still control. These may be small things, such as when to go out for a walk, what to have for a meal or what to watch on TV. Or it may be a big decision, such as whether to have chemotherapy or to ask for a second opinion about treatment.

The threat of death

Although many people with cancer can be cured, your loved one may have a fear of dying. This fear may always be there in the background but never talked about.

Even when people are cured, they often still worry that the cancer may come back. This fear may fade over time. But it's important to allow your loved one a chance to talk about it. By simply listening, you can be a support to them.



Physical effects of cancer

Tiredness

Tiredness is very common in people with cancer, especially during treatment. It can be constant or it may vary depending on what treatment someone is having. Tiredness can mean someone feels low in mood or more irritable than usual. It can also affect a person's concentration and memory.

Eating problems

Cancer treatment can sometimes cause people to:

- feel or be sick
- have a change in appetite
- have changes to their sense of taste, making some foods taste unpleasant or all foods taste the same.

Changes in appearance

Cancer treatment can cause changes in appearance. These may be temporary or permanent.

Possible changes include:

- hair loss
- putting on weight or losing weight
- scars from surgery
- skin changes, such as rashes, dry skin, spots or redness.

Changes in our appearance can make us feel vulnerable and self-conscious. Your relative or friend may worry about other people's reactions to how they look, or the effect it may have on their relationships.

Most people need time to get used to body changes. Support from family and friends can help. Remember, they are the same person you have always known. If they want to, let them talk to you about their feelings.

We have more information about coping with changes in our booklet **Body image and cancer**.



Changes to their role

During cancer treatment, many people stop doing the things that they used to enjoy or do well. They may have stopped work, or stopped doing activities that involved contact with other people. These activities can reassure us that we are competent, needed, talented or funny. They remind us that other people value our skills, knowledge and humour.

Participating in these activities can also give us a sense of self-worth. This is also known as **self-esteem**. Having positive self-esteem is about having confidence and respect for yourself. Not being able to take part in these activities can affect a person's self-worth and how they think about themselves.

Remember that in spite of all the losses and changes that your relative or friend may have to cope with, they are still the same person inside. Their skills and qualities are still there, even if they don't have the same chances to use all of them as much at the moment.

It might be helpful to think together about what they still want to do and are able to do, even if it's a small thing. Whatever they decide, it's important to support them.

Loneliness and isolation

Some people can feel isolated from their friends and workmates. If family and friends feel awkward about what to say, they may not visit or get in touch. You can help by keeping in regular contact (see pages 9–15) and being a good listener (see pages 17–24). You can encourage other people to do the same.

Depending on others

Many people find it difficult thinking of themselves as someone who has cancer. They worry that because they need other people more than normal, they are being weak. But we all depend on each other throughout life, however much we may like to think of ourselves as independent.





COPING WITH DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

Difficult emotions

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Difficult emotions

It's natural for people with cancer to have a mix of emotions. These can include sadness, fear and anger. These emotions can also come and go at different times.

Be aware that you may also be coping with strong emotions of your own. If this is the case, it's important that you have other people you can talk to and get support from. This will help you, and help you be a support to your relative or friend.

We have more information about support for you on pages 63–65.

If your relative or friend is distressed

It can be upsetting to see someone we care about crying. But crying is a natural response to distress and it can be a helpful release.

Some people don't want to cry because they feel that once they start, they won't stop. This is not true, as feelings can come and go.

Responding to distress

If your relative or friend cries, reassure them that it's okay to cry. This will let them know that you're not put off by their tears. Touching, holding hands or giving them a hug may help too.

You might want to try to 'stay strong' for them, but it's okay if you need to cry too. Being honest about your feelings will help develop trust between you. It will also make it easier for the other person to be honest about their feelings.

If you are upset, you can tell your relative or friend you are okay with feeling that way. This lets them know they can open up to you, rather than try to protect you by keeping their feelings from you.

Although it's good to be honest about your feelings, try to keep focused on the feelings of your relative or friend. This doesn't mean you don't need support. It's really important that you also have people you can talk to about how you are feeling.

If your relative or friend is angry

If you are very close to your relative or friend, there may be times when their frustration or anger with the situation is directed at you. They may be irritable or critical of your attempts to help. They might be angry about the cancer, but this can be hard to put into words. So they may take out their feelings on those closest to them. This can be hard to take, especially when you are doing your best and are also coping with your own feelings.



We have a video about Ron and his wife Linda, who talk about how their relationship changed after Ron was diagnosed with cancer.

You can watch this video at [macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/relationships/you-and-your-partner](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/relationships/you-and-your-partner)

Responding to anger

Be ready to let go of minor arguments and offer forgiveness, understanding and support.

If your relative or friend is irritable or critical, try not to take it personally. Remember, anger and irritability are common reactions to being diagnosed with cancer. It's best not to respond angrily. If you feel upset or angry, give yourself time to calm down.

After a disagreement, find a time when you are both calm to talk about what happened and how you both feel. Instead of saying 'You're always criticising me' or 'You make me feel sad', try to say something like 'I felt upset when we disagreed today. Can we work this out together?'.

In most disagreements, both people have some degree of responsibility. Listen to what your relative or friend tells you and ask yourself 'Do they have a point?' and 'Could I do anything differently?'. Talk about what both of you could change to make things work better.

Aim to make up and forgive each other at the end of your talk. A hug or a kind word can help to put the disagreement behind you and make you feel closer. However, this doesn't mean you should put up with an abusive relationship. If your relative or friend is being consistently verbally abusive or physically abusive, seek help and advice from your GP or someone else you trust.

Here are some tips on coping with anger:

- Try not to take it personally – remind yourself they may be upset because of the cancer, rather than with you.
- Find a time when you are both calm to talk about it.
- Look for solutions you can both agree on.
- Get support for yourself from someone outside of the relationship.

'At the beginning, there were times when I could have screamed because sometimes he was so ungrateful for ordinary things that I did for him. When he had time to reflect, he knew how he'd made me feel so he'd apologise. He didn't mean it and I know in his heart he didn't.'

Linda

Counselling

Most of the time people with cancer, and those close to them, adjust and find ways to cope with feelings of anger or anxiety. But sometimes people need outside help to deal with the strong emotions they have.

If you or your relative or friend is struggling with anger, anxiety or depression, it may be hard to share this with family or friends.

A GP, cancer doctor or specialist nurse may suggest professional support. Seeing a trained counsellor or psychologist can give you or your relative or friend an opportunity to talk to someone who is outside the situation. They can also help explore feelings and find ways of coping.



We have a video about counselling that you can watch at [macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/your-emotions/who-can-help](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/your-emotions/who-can-help)





PRACTICAL HELP

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Offering to help

One of the most common problems when trying to help a person with cancer is knowing where to start. If you want to help, but don't know what to do first, this section has some tips and advice.

It's important to first find out if your help is wanted and what kind of help is needed. Once you know your help is wanted, you can offer to help with one of the things they need. It's always good to try to be specific. Rather than saying, 'Let me know if there's anything I can do', you could ask:

- 'Shall I do the shopping?'
- 'Would you like me to pick up the children from school?'

You can also say that you'll keep in touch to see if there are other things you can help with.

Some people find it hard to accept support, even if they need it. This means that your offer may be refused. Try not to take this personally. They might not be ready to accept help yet or might wish to remain independent. You could make the offer again at a later date if they ever need any support.

Don't pester your relative or friend into accepting your help. Some people are happy to do things on their own.

Decide what you can do and want to do

Begin by considering what you're good at. You probably have many skills that will be helpful when it comes to supporting your relative or friend.

Here are some suggestions of things you could do to help:

- Cook for them – taking them pre-cooked, frozen meals may be welcome.
- Make meals for other family members.
- Help around the house with cleaning or in the garden.
- Take the children out for the day, to give the person some rest or time with their partner.
- Babysit so that their partner can visit them in hospital.
- Have groceries, such as bread and milk, or flowers waiting for them at home when they come out of hospital – something as small as this could make a big difference to them.
- Give family members a lift to and from hospital.

'Some of my friends were great at doing the practical things I was struggling with like taking the children to school, bringing me food, and helping with cleaning. This meant I had the energy to do the things I wanted to do with my partner or children, like going for a walk or playing in the park.'

Jane

Start with small things

Starting small to begin with and offering to do one or two practical things that your relative or friend has mentioned can often help. That way, they won't feel embarrassed or overwhelmed by the attention. It's important that you only offer to do what you can manage and don't aim to do too much. It may need a little thought and some understanding of what your relative or friend needs or likes.

'During chemotherapy, it's often been the case that I can't face eating what I've bought or suddenly want something I don't have. The offers from friends to get a few things from the supermarket are a huge help. Some days it can make all the difference for someone to bring me that packet of crumpets and chocolate milkshake I suddenly crave!'

Sarah

If you've offered to cook meals, remember that people with cancer may have a small appetite or may find that things taste differently because of treatment. If they don't eat what you've prepared, it's not an insult to your cooking but simply an effect of their illness. You could try asking them if there's any particular food that they enjoy. Putting small portions on a smaller plate may also help.

Spending time together

It can help to spend regular time with your relative or friend. Think about the time you can realistically spend with them and try to be reliable. Remember that even a short visit on a regular basis will be something they can look forward to.

Going to appointments

People with cancer are often encouraged to take someone with them when they see the doctor or nurse. They often feel anxious about seeing the doctor and may forget questions they were going to ask. If they ask you to be there with them, you could offer to help them prepare for the appointment.

You may find the following suggestions useful:

- Offer to write down the questions they want to ask.
- During the appointment, avoid speaking on behalf of your relative or friend unless they ask you to – otherwise they may forget what they wanted to say.
- Listen carefully to the information and answers the doctor gives. It may help to take notes or ask the doctor if you can record the conversation, so that nothing they say is missed.
- Ask if there's any written information available to help you and your relative or friend understand more about their cancer type and its treatment.

Helping during and after appointments

Your relative or friend may find it difficult to take in information, especially if they're given bad news. Sometimes the shock of this makes a person unable to talk or think clearly for a short time. This could be a good time, with their permission, to ask the questions you know they wanted to ask. You can also make sure to write down a contact number for the Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) or consultant, in case your friend or relative wants to ask further questions or discuss what they have been told again at a later date.

You can remind them afterwards of what the doctor said. Your relative or friend may find it helps if you listen to them as they think about the choices they need to make. You may also want to read through any written information you've been given. Remember to check with your relative or friend if they want to know this information first.

You can also call our support line on **0808 808 00 00** to discuss any treatment choices and to ask for more information.

You may also feel upset by the news given to your family member or friend. Supporting someone when you feel upset can be hard, so it's important to get support for yourself (see pages 63–65).

Involve other people

Like everyone else, you have your limits. There's always something more that could be done, but it's impossible to do everything. This is why it's useful to involve other people where possible, if your relative or friend agrees to this. For example, you could set up a rota to cook meals or to drive them to hospital appointments.

You may be able to find people with skills you don't have. For example, someone else may be able to do jobs such as gardening or DIY.

For more ideas on ways to help your relative or friend, visit [macmillan.org.uk/get-involved/reachout.html](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/get-involved/reachout.html)





GETTING SUPPORT FOR YOURSELF

Looking after yourself

64

Looking after yourself

Supporting a person with cancer can be very rewarding and can bring you closer together. But it can also be demanding and sometimes upsetting. It's important to make sure that you look after yourself and have the support you need. Our booklet **When someone close to you has cancer** has helpful information.

Supporting yourself

If you're tired, it's important to rest. This may seem obvious but many people carry on, despite their tiredness, only to feel exhausted later. It's also important to get enough sleep.

Give yourself time to do things you enjoy on a regular basis. This will help you feel rested and relaxed. Try to include things that:

- involve keeping in touch with other people, such as having lunch with a friend
- give you a sense of accomplishment, such as exercising or finishing a project
- make you feel good or relaxed, such as watching a funny film.

'As a carer for someone with cancer, one of the most important things I have learnt is that you also need to focus time and energy on yourself.'

Lavern

Help from others

Many people find that they benefit from the support of others. This is nothing to be ashamed of and you shouldn't feel you've failed if you need some support to deal with your own emotions. Sometimes talking to another family member or friend can be enough. Or you may find it helpful to talk with your relative or friend's specialist nurse. They will be able to tell you if there are any local support organisations or counselling services that may be suitable for you.

If your employer has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you can contact a counsellor that way. You can also contact our cancer support specialists on **0808 808 00 00** or one of the organisations on page 73, who can give you more information and support.

If you have access to the internet, you may want to join an online support group or chat room for people affected by cancer. Our online community (**community.macmillan.org.uk**) is a site where you can chat to other people, blog about your experiences, make friends and join support groups. You can share your own thoughts and feelings, and get support too.

Supporting someone with cancer may be something new to you. Every person is unique and there is no one way to get it right. It's important to remember that it's your care and compassion that your relative or friend will value most.



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About our information

We provide expert, up-to-date information about cancer. And all our information is free for everyone.

Order what you need

You may want to order more leaflets or booklets like this one. Visit **be.macmillan.org.uk** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

We have booklets on different cancer types, treatments and side effects. We also have information about work, financial issues, diet, life after cancer and information for carers, family and friends.

All of our information is also available online at **macmillan.org.uk/cancerinformation**. There you'll also find videos featuring real-life stories from people affected by cancer, and information from health and social care professionals.

Other formats

We also provide information in different languages and formats, including:

- audiobooks
- Braille
- British Sign Language
- Easy Read booklets
- ebooks
- large print
- translations.

Find out more at **macmillan.org.uk/otherformats**

If you'd like us to produce information in a different format for you, email us at **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Help us improve our information

We know that the people who use our information are the real experts. That's why we always involve them in our work. If you've been affected by cancer, you can help us improve our information.

We give you the chance to comment on a variety of information including booklets, leaflets and fact sheets.

If you'd like to hear more about becoming a reviewer, email **reviewing@macmillan.org.uk** You can get involved from home whenever you like, and we don't ask for any special skills – just an interest in our cancer information.



Other ways we can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we're here to support you. No one should face cancer alone.

Talk to us

If you or someone you know is affected by cancer, talking about how you feel and sharing your concerns can really help.

Macmillan Support Line

Our free, confidential phone line is open Monday–Friday, 9am–8pm. Our cancer support specialists can:

- help with any medical questions you have about your cancer or treatment
- help you access benefits and give you financial guidance
- be there to listen if you need someone to talk to
- tell you about services that can help you in your area.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00** or email us via our website, **macmillan.org.uk/talktous**

Information centres

Our information and support centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. There, you can speak with someone face to face.

Visit one to get the information you need, or if you'd like a private chat, most centres have a room where you can speak with someone alone and in confidence.

Find your nearest centre at **macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres** or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Talk to others

No one knows more about the impact cancer can have on your life than those who have been through it themselves. That's why we help to bring people together in their communities and online.

Support groups

Whether you are someone living with cancer or a carer, we can help you find support in your local area, so you can speak face to face with people who understand. Find out about support groups in your area by calling us or by visiting **macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport**

Online community

Thousands of people use our online community to make friends, blog about their experiences and join groups to meet other people going through the same things. You can access it any time of day or night. Share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts at **macmillan.org.uk/community**

The Macmillan healthcare team

Our nurses, doctors and other health and social care professionals give expert care and support to individuals and their families. Call us or ask your GP, consultant, district nurse or hospital ward sister if there are any Macmillan professionals near you.

'Everyone is so supportive on the online community, they know exactly what you're going through. It can be fun too. It's not all just chats about cancer.'

Mal

Help with money worries

Having cancer can bring extra costs such as hospital parking, travel fares and higher heating bills. If you've been affected in this way, we can help.

Financial guidance

Our financial team can give you guidance on mortgages, pensions, insurance, borrowing and savings.

Help accessing benefits

Our benefits advisers can offer advice and information on benefits, tax credits, grants and loans. They can help you work out what financial help you could be entitled to. They can also help you complete your forms and apply for benefits.

Macmillan Grants

Macmillan offers one-off payments to people with cancer. A grant can be for anything from heating bills or extra clothing to a much-needed break.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00** to speak to a financial guide or benefits adviser, or to find out more about Macmillan Grants. We can also tell you about benefits advisers in your area. Visit **[macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport)** to find out more about how we can help you with your finances.

Help with work and cancer

Whether you're an employee, a carer, an employer or are self-employed, we can provide support and information to help you manage cancer at work. Visit **[macmillan.org.uk/work](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/work)**



Macmillan's My Organiser app

This free mobile app can help you manage your treatment, from appointment times and contact details, to reminders for when to take your medication. Search 'My Organiser' on the Apple App Store or Google Play on your phone.

Other useful organisations

There are lots of other organisations that can give you information or support.

Counselling and emotional support

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House,
15 St John's Business Park,
Lutterworth,
Leicestershire LE17 4HB
Tel 01455 883 300
Email bacp@bacp.co.uk
www.bacp.co.uk

Promotes awareness of counselling and signposts people to appropriate services. You can search for a qualified counsellor at **itsgoodtotalk.org.uk**

Samaritans

Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK,
Chris, PO Box 9090,
Stirling FK8 2SA

Helpline 116 123

Email jo@samaritans.org

www.samaritans.org

Provides confidential and non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

2nd Floor, Edward House,
2 Wakley Street,
London EC1V 7LT

Tel 020 7014 9955

Email info@ukcp.org.uk

www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Holds the national register of psychotherapists and psychotherapeutic counsellors, listing practitioners who meet exacting standards and training requirements.

General cancer support organisations

Cancer Black Care

79 Acton Lane,
London NW10 8UT

Tel 020 8961 4151

Email

info@cancerblackcare.org.uk

www.cancerblackcare.org.uk

Offers information and support for people with cancer from ethnic communities, their friends, carers and families.

Cancer Focus

Northern Ireland

40–44 Eglantine Avenue,
Belfast BT9 6DX

Helpline 0800 783 3339
(Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm)

Email

hello@cancerfocusni.org

www.cancerfocusni.org

Offers a variety of services to people affected by cancer, including a free helpline, counselling and links to local support groups.

Cancer Support Scotland

The Calman Centre,
75 Shelley Road,
Glasgow G12 0ZE

Tel 0800 652 4531

Email

info@cancersupportscotland.org

www.cancersupportscotland.org

Runs cancer support groups throughout Scotland. Also offers free complementary therapies and counselling to anyone affected by cancer.

Maggie's Centres

The Gatehouse,
10 Dumbarton Road,
Glasgow G11 6PA

Tel 0300 123 1801

Email

enquiries@maggiescentres.org

www.maggiescentres.org

Provides information about cancer, benefits advice, and emotional or psychological support.

Penny Brohn Cancer Care

Chapel Pill Lane,
Pill, Bristol BS20 0HH

Helpline 0845 123 2310
(Mon–Fri, 9.30am–5pm,
Wed, 6–8pm)

Email

helpline@pennybrohn.org

**www.pennybrohn
cancercare.org**

Offers a combination of physical, emotional and spiritual support, using complementary therapies and self-help techniques.

Tenovus

Head Office,
Gleider House,
Ty Glas Road,
Cardiff CF14 5BD

Helpline 0808 808 1010
(Mon–Sun, 8am–8pm)

Email info@

tenovuscancercare.org.uk

www.tenovus.org.uk

Aims to help everyone get equal access to cancer treatment and support. Funds research and provides support such as mobile cancer support units, a free helpline, an 'Ask the nurse' service on the website and benefits advice.

Financial or legal advice and information

Benefit Enquiry Line Northern Ireland

Helpline 0800 220 674
(Mon–Wed and Fri, 9am–5pm,
Thu, 10am–5pm)

Textphone 028 9031 1092

**www.nidirect.gov.uk/
money-tax-and-benefits**

Provides information and advice about disability benefits and carers' benefits.

Citizens Advice

Provides advice on a variety of issues including financial, legal, housing and employment issues. Find details for your local office in the phone book or on one of these websites:

England and Wales

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Scotland

www.cas.org.uk

Northern Ireland

www.citizensadvice.co.uk

Civil Legal Advice

Helpline 0345 345 4345

(Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm,
Sat, 9am–12.30pm)

Minicom 0345 609 6677

**[www.gov.uk/
civil-legal-advice](http://www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice)**

Has a list of legal advice centres in England and Wales and solicitors that take legal aid cases. Offers a free translation service if English isn't your first language.

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

**Personal Independence
Payment Helpline**

0345 850 3322

Textphone 0345 601 6677

Carer's Allowance Unit

0345 608 4321

Textphone 0345 604 5312

www.gov.uk/browse/benefits

Manages state benefits in England, Scotland and Wales. You can apply for benefits and find information online or through its helplines.

GOV.UK

www.gov.uk

Has information about social security benefits and public services in England, Scotland and Wales.

National Debtline (England, Wales and Scotland)

Tricorn House,
51–53 Hagley Road,
Edgbaston,
Birmingham B16 8TP

Tel 0808 808 4000

(Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm,
Sat, 9.30am–1pm)

www.nationaldebtline.org

A national helpline for people with debt problems. The service is free, confidential and independent.

NiDirect

www.nidirect.gov.uk

Has information about benefits and public services in Northern Ireland.

Personal Finance Society – 'Find an Adviser' service www.findanadviser.org

Use the website to find qualified financial advisers in your area.

Support for young people

Youth Access

1–2 Taylors Yard,
67 Alderbrook Road,
London SW12 8AD

Tel 020 8772 9900

(Mon–Fri, 9.30am–1pm
and 2–5.30pm)

Email

admin@youthaccess.org.uk

www.youthaccess.org.uk

A national organisation providing counselling and information for young people. Support is given through local young people's services. Find your local service via the website.

Support for carers

Carers UK

Helpline (England, Scotland, Wales) 0808 808 7777

(Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm)

Tel (Northern Ireland)

028 9043 9843

Email

advice@carersuk.org

www.carersuk.org

Offers information and support to carers across the UK. Can put people in contact with support groups for carers in their area.

Support for older people

Age UK

Tavis House,
1–6 Tavistock Square,
London WC1H 9NA

Helpline (England and Wales) 0800 169 6565

Helpline (Scotland)

0800 470 8090

Helpline (Northern Ireland)

0808 808 7575

(Daily, 8am–7pm)

www.ageuk.org.uk

Provides information and advice for older people across the UK via the website and advice line. Also publishes impartial and informative fact sheets and advice guides.

Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up to date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. So far as is permitted by law, Macmillan does not accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information or websites included or referred to in it. Some photos are of models.

Thanks

This booklet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by our Chief Medical Editor, Dr Tim Iveson, Macmillan Consultant Medical Oncologist.

With thanks to: Dr Claire Delduca, Macmillan Clinical Psychologist; Dr Chris Hewitt, Consultant Clinical Psychologist; and Dr Kathleen McHugh, Consultant Clinical Psychologist.

Thanks also to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this edition, and those who shared their stories.

Sources

We've listed a sample of the sources used in the publication below. If you'd like further information about the sources we use, please contact us at **bookletfeedback@macmillan.org.uk**

Macmillan Cancer Support. *Facing the fight alone: Isolation among cancer patients*. Feb 2013.

Macmillan Cancer Support. *Hidden at home: The social needs of people with cancer*. March 2015.

Robb, et al. *Communication relationships and care: A reader*. Routledge. 2004.

Can you do something to help?

We hope this booklet has been useful to you. It's just one of our many publications that are available free to anyone affected by cancer. They're produced by our cancer information specialists who, along with our nurses, benefits advisers, campaigners and volunteers, are part of the Macmillan team. When people are facing the toughest fight of their lives, we're there to support them every step of the way.

We want to make sure no one has to go through cancer alone, so we need more people to help us. When the time is right for you, here are some ways in which you can become a part of our team.



Share your cancer experience

Support people living with cancer by telling your story, online, in the media or face to face.

Campaign for change

We need your help to make sure everyone gets the right support. Take an action, big or small, for better cancer care.

Help someone in your community

A lift to an appointment. Help with the shopping.
Or just a cup of tea and a chat. Could you lend a hand?

Raise money

Whatever you like doing you can raise money to help.
Take part in one of our events or create your own.

Give money

Big or small, every penny helps.
To make a one-off donation see over.

Call us to find out more

0300 1000 200

macmillan.org.uk/getinvolved

Please fill in your personal details

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other

Name

Surname

Address

Postcode

Phone

Email

Please accept my gift of £

(Please delete as appropriate)

I enclose a cheque / postal order /
Charity Voucher made payable to
Macmillan Cancer Support

OR debit my:

Visa / MasterCard / CAF Charity
Card / Switch / Maestro

Card number

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Signature

Date / /

Don't let the taxman keep your money

Do you pay tax? If so, your gift will be worth 25% more to us – at no extra cost to you. All you have to do is tick the box below, and the tax office will give 25p for every pound you give.

- ☐ I am a UK tax payer and I would like Macmillan Cancer Support to treat all donations I make or have made to Macmillan Cancer Support in the last 4 years as Gift Aid donations, until I notify you otherwise.

I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. I understand Macmillan Cancer Support will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give.

Macmillan Cancer Support and our trading companies would like to hold your details in order to contact you about our fundraising, campaigning and services for people affected by cancer. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way please tick this box. ☐

In order to carry out our work we may need to pass your details to agents or partners who act on our behalf.



If you'd rather donate online go to macmillan.org.uk/donate

Please cut out this form and return it in an envelope (no stamp required) to:
Supporter Donations, Macmillan Cancer Support, FREEPOST LON15851,
89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ

More than one in three of us will get cancer. For most of us it will be the toughest fight we ever face. And the feelings of isolation and loneliness that so many people experience make it even harder. But you don't have to go through it alone. The Macmillan team is with you every step of the way.

We are the nurses and therapists helping you through treatment. The experts on the end of the phone. The advisers telling you which benefits you're entitled to. The volunteers giving you a hand with the everyday things. The campaigners improving cancer care. The community there for you online, any time. The supporters who make it all possible.

Together, we are all Macmillan Cancer Support.

For cancer support every step of the way, call Macmillan on 0808 808 00 00 (Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm) or visit macmillan.org.uk

Hard of hearing? Use textphone
0808 808 0121, or Text Relay.
Non-English speaker? Interpreters available.
Braille and large print versions on request.

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Next planned review 2018. Macmillan Cancer Support, registered charity in England and Wales (261017), Scotland (SC039907) and the Isle of Man (604). Printed using sustainable material. Please recycle.



WE ARE
MACMILLAN.
CANCER SUPPORT