When you or someone close to you is diagnosed as having cancer, it is perfectly natural to experience some kind of emotional reaction to this.

This sheet will tell you about some of the emotional reactions that people who have been diagnosed as having cancer often experience. However, please note that everyone is different and that no two people will experience the same feelings. Also, some people do not experience any of the reactions described here, but just 'take things in their stride'.

Please also understand that these reactions are normal, and happen to normal people.

So if whilst reading this, you realise that you have felt, or are feeling some of these, be reassured that you are normal. If you don't have any of them, you are also normal.

When you learn you have cancer

“When he said I had cancer, I felt as if I’d just been hit by a ten-ton truck. I couldn’t believe it. Everything just stood still, and all I could think was I must get the tea on soon or it won’t be ready when John comes home”.

“Cancer - Oh God! I’m going to die, it can’t be right”.

Most people are thrown into a state of shock when they are given a diagnosis of cancer. Even if it is suspected, the reality of the words can be devastating. For many people, the word 'cancer' conjures up images of horrible illness and terrible death, even though this is often a long way from the truth. So in many people, hearing that they have cancer can result in a rush of all the bad things they may have ever heard. Even if you don’t have a particularly negative or fearful view of it, hearing that you have it can be very very frightening.
Feelings of shock

“I just didn’t feel anything. I went numb. It was like I wasn’t really there but was watching this all happen to someone else, like in a dream or a film”.

The first thing that often happens to people is that they feel numb. It is too much to cope with, so they go into shock. You may also feel that it isn’t really happening to you. It is a nightmare from which you are going to wake up. THIS IS PERFECTLY NORMAL.

The mind often needs time to take on board frightening news. If you are someone who already had a very fearful view of cancer, then you are likely to feel very scared. Even if you don’t, hearing you have it can still be perceived as very frightening.

One effect of this shock is to make it hard for you to take in information the doctor or nurse is giving you. You may leave only remembering that you have been told you have cancer, and not remembering other information, eg. about treatment, or positive information regarding the fact that you have a condition that responds well to treatment.

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT YOU TAKE ADVANTAGE OF ANY OFFERS OF FURTHER INFORMATION, OR CONTACT ANYONE WHOSE DETAILS YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN.

Otherwise, you may go on thinking the worse and will miss out on things that could help.

When you learn that someone close to you has cancer

Whether that is your partner, a child, a parent or other close friend or relative, you may well experience the same kind of shock and numbness.

Anxiety

What do we mean by anxiety?

"It just goes round and round in my head, and I can't stop worrying about it all the time. It's driving me crazy and making me feel sick. I'm so afraid".

Anxiety is often experienced as worry. Common symptoms include feeling afraid or worried. Often this can be difficult to 'switch off'. People sometimes find that when they go to bed, they worry and it can make it harder to get to sleep. Frightening thoughts and images concerning the illness, treatment etc can run riot. Often these thoughts centre on the worst happening.

Worry can be experienced physically eg. feeling sick, churning stomach, tense, shaky, and sometimes it causes headaches or general aches and pains. These symptoms may cause even more worry, as they can be mistaken for cancer symptoms.

IF YOU HAVE ANY SYMPTOMS YOU ARE NOT SURE ABOUT, YOU SHOULD CHECK WITH YOUR GP OR SPECIALIST.

Once the reality of the diagnosis starts to sink in, it is perfectly normal to go through a period of feeling very anxious or frightened. People have all sorts of concerns ranging from fears of the illness itself, the treatment and its effect on loved ones etc. As you start to take in helpful information about the illness and its treatment, many of these will subside.
**Depression**

What do we mean by depression?

"I just feel so miserable. Nothing seems worthwhile any more and I just can't be bothered doing anything. Even the things I used to enjoy seem pointless".

Depression is often experienced as feeling very low in spirits, a 'can't be bothered with anything' feeling, lack of energy and feelings of helplessness and worthlessness.

It can make it difficult to motivate oneself to do anything, and can result in avoidance of social situations. It also can result in inactivity and not doing things that would normally bring pleasure or enjoyment. For example someone who normally enjoys walking, swimming or listening to music may find themselves just sitting around as they 'can't be bothered'.

Many people go through a period of feeling depressed. This may be because the illness is interfering with your life, eg. affecting your career. It may be because of fears that one will not survive. Again, this will usually subside naturally as you get to grips with the situation.

**Anger**

"I just feel so furious with everyone. Why me? I've never done anything to deserve this. I've eaten a healthy diet, never smoked. I snap at everyone and I've no patience. It isn't fair!"

Many people feel very angry when they have cancer. "Why me?" is a very common feeling. Again, this is a very normal reaction. This anger may be expressed in a number of ways. It may become focused on the professionals who are not felt to be doing enough. It may become directed at your family, or even oneself.

It is important to acknowledge that you do have the right to feel angry. After all, we don't ask to become ill. Again, this will normally reduce over time.

Most reactions will only last for a short period of time, perhaps a few weeks, or even as little as a few days.

Treatment may also affect emotions. Some people feel weepy after surgery. Radiotherapy can bring tiredness and irritability. Some chemotherapies can result in irritability, depression and mood swings.

If you are having treatment and notice that you do not feel good emotionally, it is worth discussing it with your doctor or specialist nurse.

**When your loved one has cancer**

One of the hardest things for many people is handling the feelings of others. If you are the patient, you may find it hard to know what to say to your family. If you are the relative you may have the same problem. How do you deal with your feelings - and theirs?

There are no rules on this. You know your family better than most.

Many people (even within normally very sharing relationships) find it difficult to share their feelings about cancer. This can result in an avoidance of talking about important issues like how everyone feels. Fears are often kept to oneself.

Generally we recommend that whilst it may take time and everyone does need their own space, it is important to work toward sharing feelings. Don't be afraid to let your family know how you feel. Sharing can help relatives support each other. Putting on a brave face is all very well, but it can be emotionally very draining, and can mean that you do not always get all the support you need.
What to do about your emotional reactions
Even though we have emphasised the normality of reacting in different ways to cancer, that does not mean that you have to ‘grit your teeth’ and suffer alone.

Many people find that with the help and support of friends and family, they can cope with their emotions. However, sometimes one can feel so distressed, either through depression or anxiety or both, that more help is required. There are lots of avenues of help.

Firstly, never feel shy of discussing your feelings with your GP, consultant or nurse specialist. It may be that some of your anxiety can be relieved through being given helpful information about your condition. It may be that your consultant can reassure you that your worst fears are groundless. Asking questions is always better than worrying about things you are not sure of. When fears are relieved, depression may also lift.

Secondly, many people find it helpful to join support groups where one can meet and talk to other cancer sufferers and their relatives. One common complaint patients make, and quite rightly so, is that only a person who has had cancer can really know how it feels.

Thirdly, counselling may be helpful, as may referral to the Psychology Department. In the past, psychologists may have been viewed as only for the mentally ill, but now it is well recognised that psychologists have an important part to play in helping normal people cope with difficult or frightening situations.

On a positive note
For some people, cancer can be a very positive experience. It is seen as a challenge.

It can also help one rethink the priorities of life and get as much out of life as possible. It is not uncommon for people once treatment is completed, to go on their dream holiday, or change course in life. If you do get the urge to go and explore the Sahara Desert, that's fine, but we recommend that you discuss it first with your doctor.

If you have any queries, or require further information please contact Dr Holly Capey-Wade or Dr Kirsty Williams Clinical Psychologists on 01332 788798.

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