

## 38. Worry, Fear or Anxiety

Worry, fear and anxiety are entirely normal reactions to threat and uncertainty, so it is little wonder that these reactions are common among people with cancer and their families. **Anxiety** is a clinical term for **fear** that is out of proportion to the real danger facing someone, though admittedly the distinction between real and imagined threat is often hard to make in the context of cancer. **Worry** of course is a wholly mental activity in which our minds attempt to imagine the future so as to avoid danger. Anxiety (including worry and fear) can be temporary and about something in particular (e.g. having a scan), or long term and felt more-or-less all the time. Anxiety can also intensify the experience of pain, as well as be a result of it.

Anxiety can become a serious problem when it leads people to avoid or withdraw from anything associated with “danger” because this can soon generalise to more and more things (e.g. leaving the house, socialising, relationship etc.) This **behaviour** in response to fear (i.e. avoidance) is one of three components of fear. The others are **bodily arousal** (the fight or flight response) in which the body prepares itself for escape (muscle tension, heart palpitations, over breathing, perspiration, etc.) and fearful thoughts such as worry (the mental or **cognitive response**). Ideally, all three should be assessed and tackled.

Worry, fear and anxiety are often caused by confusion, frustration, helplessness and loss of control over events. Simple information can often restore some degree of control. Ultimately, a fear of the unknown may be the underlying cause (e.g. fears of recurrence, dying, how others would manage etc.) and this can lead to ‘catastrophic worrying’ in which people imagine the worst case scenarios even when they are extremely unlikely to happen. However, there are a number of clinical situations that are especially frightening to some patients either because they are similar to existing fears, or because they are unfamiliar and represent an uncontrollable threat: e.g. claustrophobia in response to having an MRI scan or wearing a radiotherapy mask; needle phobia in the context of chemotherapy.

### How can I manage these worries, fears and anxieties?

- Fear and worry are entirely normal responses in the face of threat, uncertainty and unexpected events. Having a diagnosis of cancer can therefore naturally trigger feelings of fear and worry.
- Obtaining reliable information can reduce the fear of the unknown so ask your professional team any questions you would like answered. They will do their best to answer them.
- Think about whether any other items on the problem list are contributing to your fears and worries.
- Try to explore the anxiety further:
  - When and where did the fear begin?
  - What bodily sensations do you experience when you are anxious (e.g. Muscle tension, heart pounding, feeling restless)?
  - Did you have these fears before you were diagnosed with cancer?
  - What are you aware of thinking and feeling when your fears occur? Try to capture these *thoughts* and write them down.
  - What do you think may be at the root of your fears, the source of the threat? (e.g. what do you imagine will happen? What do you associate with the threat)?
  - Are you facing any other worries at the moment? These may be contributing to your overall anxiety.
  - How much support do you feel you are getting?
- Ideally, treatment involves tackling all three systems simultaneously:
  - Learning to keep your body calm (*bodily response*) through learning to relax your muscles and slow your breathing. Obtaining some relaxation exercises on CD can be helpful, though Yoga or meditation classes can also help you learn to relax.
  - Learning to identify and challenge your unhelpful thoughts and assumptions about the situation (*cognitive response*), and

- Confronting difficult situation you are avoiding (*behavioural response*). The longer you avoid something the more difficult it becomes to face it again.
- Although there is a great deal people can do for themselves (e.g. making sense of one's fears by talking them through with others; obtaining a relaxation CD etc.), if the issues are complex or long-standing it may be sensible to make a referral to someone who specialises in emotional problems (e.g. a clinical psychologist).

## Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p><b>Livewell South West: Panic</b> This workshop aims to break down some of the myths surrounding panic and help you to manage your panic attacks.</p> <p><b>Mindfulness</b> Mindfulness practice can help you develop the ability to deal with life's pressures. Mindfulness meditation is a skill you can develop and a form of self-awareness training that helps you get to know yourself more fully, think more clearly and in the present moment.</p> <p><b>Managing Anxiety</b> This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological and physical symptoms of anxiety and strategies to manage this including breathing, goal setting and cognitive behaviour therapy</p> <p><b>Managing Low Mood</b> This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological symptoms of low mood as well as providing strategies to manage this</p> <p><b>Managing Stress</b> This one hour workshop introduces the symptoms of stress and how the body responds, and provides simple strategies to manage this</p> <p><b>Sleep Feel, Feel Well</b> Introduces ways to support restful sleep</p>	<p><b>Livewell South West:</b> To book a place on any of the 1 hour workshops please call: Tel: 01752 435419 or Email: plymouthoptions@nhs.net</p>
<p><b>Mustard Tree Cancer Support &amp; Triangle Drop In Centres</b> Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers</p>	<p><b>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital:</b> Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 <b>Kingsbridge:</b> Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 <b>Liskeard:</b> Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 <b>Tavistock:</b> Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935</p>
<p><b>Pauls Place</b> B&amp;B in North Devon for young adults bereaved, life limiting illness or carer. Parents of a child with terminal or life threatening illness, needing fulltime care or have lost a child. The grant from Pauls Place can cover the cost of accommodation for up to a week.</p>	<p>Pauls Place enquiries: Tel: 01271 891076/07793 980760 Applications must be made by a Health Care Professional</p>
<p><b>Other Resources</b></p>	<p>Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse, District Nurse, Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist.</p>

## National Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p><b>Macmillan Cancer Support</b> Provide comprehensive advice and information on all aspects of cancer.</p>	<p>www.macmillan.org.uk <b>0808 808 0000</b> (Mon-Fri, 9am-8pm)</p>

## Further Information:

<p><b>Macmillan Cancer Support booklets:</b> – available free from the Mustard Tree Cancer Support Centre</p>	<p><b>BHOC Information and Support Centre</b></p>
<p>Your feelings after cancer treatment</p>	<p><i>Managing the Stress of Cancer</i></p>
<p>How are you feeling?</p>	
<p>Life After Cancer Treatment</p>	
<p>How are you feeling? The emotional effects of cancer</p>	