

36. Loneliness or Isolation

Loneliness or isolation are common experiences among people with cancer. A recent UK study ¹ found that one in seven people who had recently finished cancer treatment had been distressed by feelings of loneliness or isolation. Loneliness can mean different things to different people but is usually defined as feelings of emptiness and social isolation. It is possible to feel lonely and isolated even when there are many people around. Often, the loneliness is caused by a feeling that one is going through the experience of cancer alone and that no one else can fully understand the experience. Contact with previous patients can sometimes help. For other people, loneliness is due to not having the support of family or friends nearby or at all.

The disease itself, the treatment or the time taken up with hospital visits may physically prevent people from socialising as they once did, though there are a variety of emotional or psychological reasons that may also make people not feel like socialising. Loneliness is an extremely personal experience that does not always relate directly to the amount of support people are offered.

The main consideration seems to be whether or not a person has someone in whom they can confide. Sometimes patients feel that other people are too distressed themselves, too vulnerable or otherwise not appropriate to be a reliable source of support. On the other hand, some patients hate the thought of feeling 'a burden' on others and consequently fail to make use of the support that *is* available to them.

How can I manage these feelings?

- Loneliness and isolation are common feelings among people with cancer so you are certainly not alone in feeling this way. It is certainly nothing to be embarrassed about.
- Consider whether (a) you are generally socially isolated (literally on your own for long periods of time without the opportunity to have contact with others), (b) you have become socially withdrawn in recent weeks or months, or (c) you are not using the support that is available to you.

(a) It may be helpful to join a support group where you can meet people who may be experiencing similar problems to yourself (see appendix for a list of support groups in your area). Of course this takes courage but confidence in anything only comes from actually doing the thing in question. Alternatively you may have a cancer information and support centre locally where you could drop in and find out about what is available locally. Similarly, phoning the Macmillan helpline can be very helpful.

(b) If you have become socially withdrawn recently, consider whether you might be depressed as well (see *Depression elsewhere in this directory*).

(c) If emotional support is available (for example partner, family or friends) what makes it difficult to use these possible supports? Is everyone else forcing you to be positive at all times? Do you worry that by talking about your concerns you will be causing distress to people you care about? Have you tried saying that you find it hard to talk? What solutions have you thought about for resolving your loneliness? How might you become more engaged with the world around you? What support do you need in becoming more involved?

- Several counselling services are available offering free, confidential sessions, to anyone affected by a cancer diagnosis. You do not always need a doctor's referral. See local and national resources below.
- Loneliness can sometimes be a feature of other aspects of on-going cancer treatment such as:
 - Feeling sad or depressed
 - Concern about your appearance
 - Difficulty making plans
 - Mobility problems
 - Fatigue or pain
 - Relationship with your partner, children, family or friends

There are sections on all these topics elsewhere in this director

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Counselling service within the support centre at Derriford and the outreach centres. Available for cancer patients, their carers and families</p>	<p>Mustard Tree macmillan Centre One hour appointments See counselling leaflet for further details Tel: 01752 430060</p>
<p>Age UK Plymouth Community Support Services offer support for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support in attending appointments • Assistance with shopping trips • One-to-one support • Sitting Service • Social activities/lunch club 	<p>Plymouth Contact: Home Care Tel: 01752 831989</p> <p>Cornwall Contact: Home Care Tel: 01872 266388</p>
<p>Livewell South West: Panic This workshop aims to break down some of the myths surrounding panic and help you to manage your panic attacks.</p> <p>Mindfulness 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>Managing Anxiety 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>Managing Low Mood This one hour workshop provides information on the psychological symptoms of low mood as well as providing strategies to manage this</p> <p>Managing Stress This one hour workshop introduces the symptoms of stress and how the body responds, and provides simple strategies to manage this</p> <p>Sleep Feel, Feel Well Introduces ways to support restful sleep</p>	<p>Livewell South West: To book a place on any of the 1 hour workshops please call: Tel: 01752 435419 or Email: plymouthoptions@nhs.net</p>
<p>Mustard Tree Cancer Support & Triangle Drop In Centres Ask questions, share concerns, offers a range of services including benefits advice. Support, advice and information for cancer patients and their carers</p>	<p>Mustard Tree, Derriford Hospital: Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm 01752 430060/01752 431468 Kingsbridge: Tuesdays 10am to 4pm 01548 852349 Liskeard: Thursdays 10am to 4pm 01579 373500 Tavistock: Fridays 10am to 4pm 01822 615935</p>
<p>Plymouth Befriending Consortium This is a befriending service, which will support isolated older people including those with a dementia related condition or mental frailty. They provide one to one support and lunch clubs</p>	<p>The Guildhall, Royal Parade, Plymouth PL1 2EW Tel: 01752 604455 Email: befriendingpcbc@btconnect.com</p>

Local Resources continued:

Buddying & Befriending Service The Living With and Beyond Cancer team have set up a buddying service and will introduce you to someone who could support you. You can ask for their support from the time you are diagnosed right through to the end of treatment and beyond. Its up to you.	Contact: Annie Charles The Mustard Tree Cancer Support Centre, Derriford Hospital, Plymouth PL6 8DH tel: 01752 431468 Email: annecharles@nhs.net Or speak to your Clinical Nurse Specialist for more information
Other Resources	Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse, District Nurse, Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist.

National Resources:

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

Further Information:

Macmillan booklets: – Available free from the Mustard tree Cancer Support Centre
Cancer, you and your partner
Talking about your cancer
How are you feeling?
Work and cancer