

44. Hopelessness

Having events to look forward to and things to achieve is what motivates and structures our lives. Indeed, much of our sense of our identity is bound up with our own personal our life story, and our 'life trajectory' which includes goals and rewards in the future. Goals are vital to our emotional well-being. Having a 'wished-for' future is one component of hope. No matter what prognosis has been given, cancer forces people to examine the possibility that they may not live as long as they had assumed they would. Many people react to their diagnosis by preparing for the possibility of their death, closing things down rather than making plans for the future. Furthermore, cancer treatments and the illness itself severely challenge people's ability to stay involved with activities that would normally motivate them. Fatigue, pain, nausea, not to mention all the hospital appointments, make it difficult to plan things for the future. Consequently, people with cancer often become less involved with activities they would normally find appealing, and they cease to make plans for their immediate and longer-term future. But without the motivation of future pleasure and achievement, people can find themselves lacking any sense of direction and with excessive time in which to ruminate and worry.

The other main source of hopelessness is when people have had repeated disappointments, leading them to expect nothing but further disappointments in the future. Consequently the person may prefer to live without plans for fear of having their hopes dashed once again. They may worry that if they look forward to something they are merely tempting fate, and that it will be snatched away from them again. These are common and understandable reactions but they also contain dangers. Without a sense of future, and without goals, people are more likely to feel hopeless and depressed. Everyone needs hope: buying a lottery ticket does not mean you necessarily believe you will win. Finally, sometimes people abandon long-standing ambitions and replace them with new, more personally meaningful ones; this is a form of healthy personal growth.

If someone's cancer is incurable they may be worrying that at some point the health services will simply leave them to die without further support. This fear of abandonment is more common than it sounds so if this fear is revealed the patient should be reassured that healthcare will never abandon them and that palliative care services are there to ensure that people are comfortable and well supported until the end of their lives.

How can I manage these feelings?

- It is important to stay involved with activities that provide you with a sense of achievement and/or pleasure (pleasant things to look forward to). People feel most fulfilled when they are engaged in activities which are naturally motivating (e.g. creative arts and crafts, work etc.).
- Try to see your cancer treatment as a necessary chore that must be fitted into your otherwise busy life, rather than something which becomes the dominant feature. Therefore, try to encapsulate the illness/ treatment bits of your life, rather than letting them define you.
- Goal setting is very helpful – consider making a commitment to an achievable daily goal such as having a brief chat with a friend or family member, taking some exercise, doing something pleasurable like having a bath, watching a DVD, etc. Also make plans for things to look forward to and achieve over the weeks and months to come.
- Hopelessness is a core risk factor for depression and/or suicidal feelings so be sure to consider these (*See Sadness and Depression elsewhere in this directory*). These feelings can always be resolved but may take specialist help. Consider a referral to clinical psychology, and/or palliative care services.
- It may be helpful to join a support group where you can talk to people who may have experienced similar problems to yourself (see appendix for a list of support groups in your area).
- You might find it helpful to discuss your feelings with a counsellor. Several counselling services are available offering free, confidential sessions, to anyone affected by a cancer diagnosis. You do not need a doctor's referral. See local and national resources below.

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<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 Macmillan Centre Provides a free counselling service to patients, their family and carers</p>	<p>Mustard Tree Macmillan Support Centre at Derriford Hospital. Counselling also available at the Outreach Centres (Kingsbridge, Liskeard & Tavistock). For more information, please call 01752 430060</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>Pauls Place B&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>Other Resources</p>	<p>Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse, District Nurse, clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor or religious leaders.</p>

National Resources:

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

Further Information:

<p>Macmillan booklets: – Available free from the Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre</p>	
Talking about your cancer	How are you feeling?