

43. Guilt

Wanting to find a cause for things that happen to us is part of our instinctive need to learn from experience, so it is little wonder that many patients ask themselves the question “*Why me?*”. The trouble is that these internal thoughts and questions can lead to anger, resentment, blaming others, or sometimes guilt about the perceived causes and consequences of cancer. For instance, it may be that the person feels they have in some way brought the illness upon themselves (e.g. smoking or sunbathing). The patient may also blame themselves for causing upset and distress to loved ones, or might worry that they have become a burden to others, either emotionally or financially. Each person will have their own specific reasons for their feelings of guilt.

Many people attribute cancer to stressful events in their recent past, such as a bereavement though, despite its intuitive appeal, there is little scientific evidence linking stressful life events with cancer or disease progression. Likewise, despite claims that personality can contribute to the development of breast cancer, the evidence strongly suggests that it does not. Some people attribute the cause of their cancer to a form of punishment, or divine retribution, for past misdeeds. For others, cancer may be a catalyst to re-examine guilty feelings from the past, but in any event, ruminating about such causes can result in regret, guilt and despair. Guilt, of course, extends to behaviour that may indeed have contributed to the cancer (smoking being the obvious example) so it is important to avoid contributing to, or reinforcing, any sense of self-blame.

Family and friends of a person with cancer might also feel guilty for a number of reasons. For example, they might feel very conscious of their own good health while their family member is unwell, or they might feel that they cannot offer as much support as they would ideally like to. They could also feel guilt when they become anxious, stressed or impatient, or when they don't believe they can provide the care and understanding that is needed.

How can I manage feelings of guilt?

Guilt about impact on others

- If you feel guilt about the impact of your illness on family and friends, try to talk to them about how you feel and find out what they truly feel. Some reassurance from them may ease your sense of guilt. Being open about your feelings can bring you closer together. For example, if the shoe were on the other foot would you perceive your loved one as being a burden?
- If you have been feeling guilty about some aspect of your life for a long time, is there anything that you would wish to do about it at this point in your life? Is it possible you could address the issues you feel guilty about?

Guilt about the diagnosis of cancer

- Cancer is a complex disease, arising from many different factors in the environment and our genes. No single factor can completely explain any cancer; most of them are out of anyone's control.
- It may help to talk about your feelings with someone you trust, in order to get an objective and realistic perspective. But if you don't want to share your feelings, try not to blame yourself – ultimately, this is very unlikely to help you, those you care about, or the situation in general.
- Consider practical ways (e.g. healthy eating, relaxation, gentle exercise etc.) in which you can contribute to your treatment and recovery – this could help you to assume a greater sense of control over your health and wellbeing.
- If your feelings of guilt persist, you might find it helpful to discuss them 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 below and the appendix at the end of this directory for further information on local and national resources).
- If the feelings of guilt seem to be very deep-seated, persistent, complex or 'stuck', then you may wish to consider seeking a referral to the Clinical Psychology Department.
- It may be helpful to join a support group where you can talk to people who may have experienced similar problems to yourself (see below and the appendix at the end of this directory for further information on local and national resources).

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Livewell South West: 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>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>Counselling Service – Mustard Tree Confidential service in the Mustard Tree and the Triangle Centres is available to patients, their carers and their family.</p>	<p>Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre Level 3 Derriford Hospital, Tel: 01752 430060 Each appointment lasts approximately 1 hour and you will be offered an initial 6 complementary sessions</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>Other Resources</p>	<p>Your GP, Oncology Doctor, Specialist Nurse, District Nurse, Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist.</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 Cancer Support Centre</p>
<p>Talking about your cancer</p>
<p>How are you feeling?</p>