

37. Sadness or Depression

It is very common to feel sad and low in spirits after a diagnosis of cancer. Sadness is a very normal emotion in the face of something that has been lost, such as the loss of the ability to enjoy certain aspects of life, or the loss of the certainty of one's health, or perhaps even the plans one had made for the future. The source of the sadness will vary from person to person. Depression is a word that professionals use to describe very deep sadness that the person concerned feels unable to shift or overcome. During the course of treatment it is common for patients to become emotionally and physically exhausted. This often looks like, and in fact can lead to, sad and depressive feelings. The important thing is not whether a person is sad or depressed (there is no physical test to tell the difference), but what is *causing* these feelings and what can be done about it.

Some patients feel a huge pressure from their family and friends to be happy and cheerful and consequently feel guilty if they feel sad and anxious and therefore try to hide these feelings, thus making the situation worse. This pressure to be positive at all times sometimes comes from the patient who doesn't want to cause further distress to the people they care about, but sometimes it comes from friends and family who can't bear to face up to the very difficult feelings the patient is having. There is also a wrong, but widely held view in society that one can only beat cancer by 'being positive'. Whatever the situation, if people feel unable to express their feelings openly and honestly, and instead hold them in, they are more likely to feel sad and depressed.

Typical features of sadness and depression include:

- Hopelessness which is pervasive, with a sense of despair
- Loss of the ability to enjoy things
- Withdrawal – the person unusually prefers to spend lots of time alone
- Helplessness or passivity
- Loss of interest in day-to-day activities
- Feelings of worthlessness and/or guilt (not simply blaming themselves for being a burden)
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Suicidal thoughts or a wish for hastened death
- The person feels stuck in their feelings and nothing they do seems to help

When assessing someone's mood, consider the...

- *Severity* of the emotions (how desperate are the feelings?)
- *Duration* of the distress (does the patient feel stuck with their feelings?)
- *complexity* of the issues underlying the sadness
- *Meaningfulness* of the feelings to the patient (do they make sense to them?)
- *Resources* available to the individual (how much confiding support is available?)

How can I manage my feelings?

- Having things to look forward to and things to achieve are vitally important to your mood and to your sense of well-being. For example, has the treatment taken over your life and forced out things to look forward to or things you can achieve?
- Goal setting can be 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 (e.g. a short walk), doing something pleasurable like having a bath, going to a film with a friend, etc.?
- Talking through your feelings with someone you trust may sound obvious but it can be very helpful, provided they are a good listener. Alternatively think about seeking professional help so that you can understand your feelings better and resolve them.
- Keep a journal to write down your feelings as they occur, or at the end of the day. This very private way of expressing and making sense of your feelings has been shown by research to be an effective way of managing stress.
- A gentle form of exercise each day, such as yoga or walking, often helps with feelings of sadness and

depression. It can also help with associated problems such as sleep problems and fatigue.

- If you or your family or friends think you may be depressed, please speak to your GP or tell your Oncology Doctor or clinical nurse specialist. They may be able to refer you to a Clinical Psychology Department or psychiatry service for help with your feelings.
- **If you are feeling suicidal, please tell a member of your healthcare team** (GP, hospital doctor, nurse, radiographer, etc.) today so that they can arrange appropriate support for you (see *Suicide Risk Assessment* in Appendix J of this directory).
- 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.
- You may find it helpful to join a local 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).

Local Resources:

Resource	Contact Details
<p>Counselling service within the support centre and outreach triangle centres Available for cancer patients, their carers and families</p>	<p>Mustard Tree Macmillan Centre One hour appointments See counselling leaflets for further information Tel : 01752 430060</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>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>