Understanding

The Emotional Effects of Cancer

A guide for patients with cancer
Understanding

The Emotional Effects of Cancer

This booklet has been written to help you to understand the emotional effects of cancer. It has been prepared and checked by medical doctors, other relevant specialists, nurses and patients. The information in this booklet is an agreed view on the emotional effects of cancer, how they are managed and ways of coping. If you are a patient, your doctor or nurse may go through the booklet with you and mark sections that are important for you. You can also make a note below of contact names and information that you may need.

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This booklet has been produced by the Irish Cancer Society to meet the need for improved communication, information and support for cancer patients and their families throughout diagnosis and treatment. We would like to thank all those patients, families and professionals whose support and advice made this publication possible.

We would particularly like to acknowledge the contribution of the many healthcare professionals who so kindly gave their time and expertise to previous editions of this booklet.

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Introduction

This booklet has been written to help you understand more about the emotional effects of cancer. The information covers various kinds of emotional effects, in particular anxiety and depression, and ways to help you to manage them.

By reading this booklet, you may learn what emotions to expect and, if you are finding it difficult to cope, to seek professional help at an early stage. We hope it answers some questions you may have.

Reading this booklet

You may find there is a lot of information to take in and that it can be hard to concentrate, especially if you are feeling anxious or worried. Remember you do not need to know everything about the emotional effects of cancer straight away. Read the parts that you’re interested in, and read more when you want more information. Some of the information may not be relevant to your situation.

If you don’t understand something that has been written, discuss it with your doctor or nurse or another relevant professional. You can also call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or email the nurses at cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie

If you prefer, you can also visit a Daffodil Centre. See page 55 for more information about Daffodil Centres. Email daffodilcentreinfo@irishcancer.ie to find your local Daffodil Centre.

Emotional effects of cancer

People have many views on cancer that can affect how they react to a cancer diagnosis. Many cancers are now curable and most can be controlled, but some people still associate cancer with pain and loss of control and dignity.

Indeed hearing the word cancer may feel like a death sentence at first. But often the fears can be worse than the reality. The idea of side-effects during treatment can give rise to worries too, even though they can be well controlled nowadays.

It is normal to be upset when told you have cancer. You are also likely to experience a range of emotions throughout your diagnosis, treatment and recovery. From shock to anger, all these feelings are normal and to be expected. It does not mean that you are not coping.

By recognising the feelings and emotions you are having, you can learn to cope better. It will also make you feel more in control of your illness. Though it can take a while to come to terms with your emotions, it will happen in time.

How might I react to a cancer diagnosis?

There are many reactions to being told you have cancer. Reactions often differ from person to person. In fact, there is no right or wrong way to feel. There is also no set time to have one particular emotion or not. Some reactions may occur at the time of diagnosis, while others might appear or reappear later during your treatment. Or you may have a delayed emotional reaction to your cancer when you are adjusting to life after treatment.

Some of the more common reactions include:

- Shock and disbelief
- Fear and uncertainty
- Loss of control
- Sorrow and sadness
- Denial
- Anger
- Resentment
- Blame and guilt
- Withdrawal and isolation
Sometimes a cancer diagnosis can bring greater distress and cause anxiety or depression.

Each person may experience some or all of these feelings, and each will handle it differently. Some days you may feel better than other days. As time goes on you will adjust to living with cancer, and it may even surprise you how well you’ve coped during your treatment. Your family and friends will also need time to get used to the diagnosis.

Sometimes you may experience very strong emotions that leave you feeling vulnerable and at a loss as to what to do. Knowing when to seek professional help is therefore important. If you develop anxiety or depression, it’s best to seek help early.

Shock and disbelief

Shock is often the first reaction to a cancer diagnosis. In fact, you may feel numb and the situation may seem ‘unreal’. Many people think cancer will never happen to them and are genuinely shocked when it does. Because it can be hard to believe, you may think at first that the doctors have made a mistake. Hearing that you have a serious illness can also make you realise that you are not superhuman but mortal after all.

Even if your doctors and nurses give you lots of information, the news may not sink in for a while. You may find yourself confused, asking the same questions over and over again. At times you may not know whom to trust. Or else you may accept the news very calmly and say nothing. Because you don’t really believe what is happening, you may not want to talk about your illness, especially to your family and close friends. These are all common reactions to a cancer diagnosis.

Fear and uncertainty

There is no doubt that cancer is a scary word. You may have many fears when first told of your diagnosis, such as:
- Fear of dying
- Fear of pain
- Fear of rejection

For most people when told they have cancer, the first thing they think about is dying. They think the worst. But many cancers can be cured. When a cure is not possible, cancer can often be controlled for a number of years with modern treatments. New treatments are also being developed all the time.

One of the greatest fears about cancer is pain. The fear of pain and pain itself can overwhelm everything else. However, some cancers cause no physical pain at all. If you do get pain, it can be controlled with very effective painkillers or other methods of pain relief like radiotherapy and nerve blocks.

You may also have fears that your experience of cancer will change who you are and that people will reject or avoid you. For example, after some cancer treatments your body image may be different, and it will take some time for you and for others to adjust to your new look.

You may also have practical worries and fears such as:
- **Financial:** What will happen if I have less income or no income? How will I pay for medical bills?
- **Job:** Will I be able to hold onto my job? Will I lose important work contacts?
- **Lifestyle:** Will I have to make big changes to my life?
- **Family:** Who will look after my children or parents? What effect will my illness have on them?

It is natural for you to be afraid or be concerned about the future. Sometimes your doctor may find it hard to predict the outcome of your treatment. As a result, living with uncertainty can make you feel anxious and fearful. You may not wish to make any plans or decisions. Often not knowing what to expect can feel worse than knowing.
Learning more about your illness and its treatment may help you feel more confident. The real facts about cancer and its treatment may not be as scary as you think. Discuss your concerns with your doctor, who will give you advice and help. Share what you have learned with your family and friends, as they are likely to be worried too.

Loss of control

Following a cancer diagnosis, it is common for people to feel their life is beyond their control. Before your diagnosis, your life may have stretched ahead full of promise, whereas now the years feel squeezed together and shortened. Your life is put on hold. You may even lose some independence and freedom.

Because you don’t know enough about your illness at first, you may rely totally on the advice of your doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals. You may not feel confident to make any decisions about your treatment. When you experience a loss of control it can lead to feelings of helplessness. You may also think that you will be unable to cope with your treatment or that you will ‘fall to pieces’ or ‘go crazy’. You may even lose hope.

It takes a while to know what is within your control and what is beyond it. Finding out as much as possible about your illness can help you gain some control. Taking an active part in making decisions about your treatment can help you to take back some control over what is happening.

Sadness and sorrow

It’s natural to feel sad when told you have cancer. You may feel sad for a variety of reasons: for the loss of your good health, for the plans that are put on hold, for any changes to your body that arise from treatment. Depending on your type of cancer, your fertility or body image may be affected by treatment. Then the sadness or sorrow can come from feeling as if a part of you has died. It may not be there all the time and may come and go, but it will gradually fade.

Denial

Sometimes after being told their diagnosis, people deny they have cancer or have difficulty in actually using the word, ‘cancer’. While this may seem unusual, it is a valid way of coping. As a result, people may not wish to mention or discuss their illness. Or else they may talk as if their illness is nothing serious. Denial may last for some time, depending on how long it takes for you to adjust to your illness. Tell your family and close friends that you would prefer not to talk about your illness, at least for the time being. Your doctors and nurses and other healthcare professionals involved with you will also understand if you don’t want to hear any information about your cancer until you’re ready.

You can talk to your doctor, nurse or another healthcare professional about these feelings. Joining a support group or visiting a support centre can help to ease these fears and emotions.

Email cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie
Understanding the emotional effects of cancer

Blame and guilt
When diagnosed with a serious illness such as cancer, it’s natural to want to know the causes. This is because we feel better or in control if we know why something has happened. You may think about your diet, lifestyle, work practices, environment or family history in search of a reason. People sometimes blame themselves or others for their illness. Or they wonder why it happened to them. As doctors rarely know exactly what has caused cancer, there is no reason for you to blame yourself.

Other times, people feel guilty because they delayed going to the doctor with their symptoms, fearing the worst. No matter what the reason, don’t torture yourself at this time. Regret serves no useful purpose. Instead focus on what you can change or do to make you feel more in control of your illness.

Withdrawal and isolation
There is no doubt that a cancer diagnosis is stressful. It can leave you feeling confused and overwhelmed, with so much information to take in. At times during your illness you may want to be left alone and withdraw from people. It’s normal for you to want to be alone to sort out your thoughts and feelings. You will want to take stock of things and work out how best you can cope. However, it is not a good idea to spend long hours on your own every day. Sometimes depression can make you avoid family and friends and stop you wanting to talk. See page 17 for more details on depression. If you isolate yourself, it can be stressful for your family and friends, as they will want to share this difficult time with you. They may worry about you needlessly. Let your family and friends know that you will talk to them once you are ready.

Anger
It’s also normal to be very upset when told you have cancer. Many aspects of your illness can result in anger and distress. Anger can often hide feelings such as fear or sadness. You may feel angry towards the doctors, nurses or other healthcare professionals who are caring for you. Or if you have a religious belief, you may feel angry with God that you have cancer. You may take out your anger on those closest to you. Feeling that you can’t protect the ones you love may also frustrate you.

Your family and friends may not always be aware that your anger is really aimed at your illness and not at them. It may be helpful to talk to them when you are calm, rather than feeling guilty or trying to bottle up your angry thoughts. Anger can affect your ability to think clearly. So if it persists and you are finding it hard to talk to your family, tell your nurse, doctor or other relevant healthcare professional.

Resentment
It is understandable that you might be resentful and unhappy because you have cancer, while other people are well. During the course of your illness and treatment, similar feelings of resentment may occur for many reasons. For example, another patient receiving the same treatment as you may respond quicker than you do. Sometimes relatives, especially adolescents, can resent the changes that your illness makes to their lives. It’s best to bring these feelings out into the open, so that they can be discussed. Bottling up resentment helps no one. Instead everyone ends up feeling angry and guilty.

Don’t bottle up your feelings – express them.

Why me?
Why does this have to happen now?
If I hadn’t... this would never have happened.
It’s all right for you, you don’t have to put up with this. How come I’m not getting better?’
Please leave me alone. I just need to be on my own.
If you would like more information on how to talk about your cancer, you could read our booklet *Who Can Ever Understand? Talking about Your Cancer*. If you would like a free copy, call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.

**Coping with advanced cancer**

If you have a diagnosis of advanced cancer, you will probably feel some of the emotions described on pages 6–11, like shock, fear, anger or a loss of control. These feelings may be even stronger or harder to manage if you know your cancer cannot be cured. For example, it may be harder to feel hopeful or you may find it hard to cope with the uncertainty that living with advanced cancer can cause.

In time, though, most people come through the initial shock and upset and find a way to cope. Some people describe advanced cancer as an emotional roller-coaster. Sometimes you may feel very low, while at other times you may feel very positive and hopeful. Fortunately, new treatments mean people are living a lot longer with advanced cancer than used to be the case. For some people, advanced cancer is like a long-term (chronic) illness.

**Coping with your emotions**

It’s important to get help if you find it hard to manage your emotions or if you are suffering from depression or anxiety. Your mental health is as important as your physical health, so tell your hospital team or another healthcare professional if you need support. There is more information on advanced cancer on our website, [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie). Or you can get support and advice from a cancer nurse by calling 1800 200 700 or by visiting a Daffodil Centre.

**Positive emotions**

A cancer experience can also bring positive emotions. However, it may be some time before you are ready to accept these emotions as positive. You may experience great love, affection and closeness from those around you, not only family and friends but also neighbours and even the healthcare team. With that can come a sense of gratitude too.

The experience of cancer can also bring personal growth and knowledge. It can make you realise where your strength lies and what is important in life for you. You may also get the chance to do and enjoy different things that you would never have done otherwise.

**Living well after cancer**

Surviving cancer brings its own issues. Once your treatment is over, you may have other fears and emotions. For example:

- You may feel isolated and afraid when you are no longer attending hospital, except for follow-up visits. It can feel like you are on your own because your doctors and nurses are no longer there to support and protect you.
- Healing your mind is also a part of recovering from cancer. This may take some time.
- It’s natural to be afraid the cancer will come back. As a result, you might worry about every ache or pain or feel very nervous before your check-ups, thinking the cancer may have come back. Gradually these fears should fade and go away.
- You may feel depressed or anxious and have ongoing feelings of sadness and anger.

Do talk to your doctor, nurse, medical social worker or other relevant healthcare professional about these feelings. Joining a support group or visiting a support centre can help to ease these fears and emotions.
Feeling distressed

Anxiety

When first diagnosed with cancer it is normal to feel anxious and worried about what will happen. Sometimes after treatment has finished you may feel anxious that your cancer will come back. Anxiety is a natural response to a stressful situation, such as cancer.

Anxiety is an unpleasant feeling and can range from unease to intense dread. Anxiety can be constant or it may come and go. Sometimes it may get worse and you may feel unable to cope. You may find it hard to concentrate and get distracted or upset easily. When it interferes with your quality of life and makes doing everyday things hard, you should seek help.

Anxiety can affect your body in many ways. It can have physical effects, psychological effects and affect your behaviour too.

Physical effects

Fear and anxiety can give rise to many physical effects. Sometimes when anxiety is severe it can lead to ‘panic attacks’. Panic attacks are brief episodes of intense anxiety. With anxiety you may experience some of the following:

- Feeling sick (nausea)
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhoea
- Lump in your throat
- Dry mouth
- Shortness of breath
- Overbreathing (hyperventilating)
- Dizziness
- Sweating
- Shaking
- Hot flushes
- Racing heartbeat (palpitations)
- Chest pain
- Pins and needles
- Tense muscles, like a knot in your stomach
- Become more sensitive to pain
- Loss of interest in sex
- Fatigue/lack of energy
- Sleep problems
- Headaches
- Less resistance to infection

You may also have:
Sometimes it may be hard to know if anxiety or your treatment is causing some of the physical effects. For example, anxiety may cause fatigue, but treatment can too. Talk to your doctor or nurse or other healthcare professional, who will be able to offer you advice. See page 25 for more information on how to cope with physical effects.

Most people adjust and learn to cope with anxiety during their illness. However, for others it can be very distressing and they will need professional help. It’s a good idea to seek help early. That way you can concentrate on planning your recovery.

Psychological effects
The psychological effects of anxiety involve what you think, feel and say to yourself when you are anxious. Often you may experience the following:

- Fear and dread
- Worry
- Negative thoughts
- The same feelings over and over again
- Some people get confused and mixed-up when they’re anxious and later cannot remember what they felt. If you do experience an anxiety attack, write down what you think and feel at the time. It will help you to understand what is happening to you.

Behaviour
Anxiety can also make us behave or act in a certain way. If you are deeply anxious, you may be:

- Irritable with others
- Moody
- Nervous
- Tearful
- Angry
- Avoiding people and places

Avoidance is one of the most common reactions to anxiety. You may find that you delay attending the hospital for tests because you fear the results. Or else you might make excuses to avoid going out with your family and friends. In fact, your social life may become limited because of your avoidance behaviour.

Coping with anxiety
There are many ways to help you cope with anxiety. A combination of talking, getting information, relaxing, doing things to make you feel good, and possibly medication, will help you. See page 30 for more information. If anxiety is making your life miserable, talk to your doctor, nurse or medical social worker for advice. There’s more about getting professional help on page 41.

If financial worries are causing your anxiety, contact the medical social worker in your hospital or a Department of Social Protection (DSP) representative. These people are usually based in local health centres or local DSP offices. Your local Citizens Information Centre may also be able to give you advice and direct you to services in the community.

Depression
It is natural to feel some sadness during and after your illness. At times you may feel low and not your usual self. You may even feel ‘slowed up’ and empty. But usually people or events will cheer you up.

However, if nothing cheers you up and you are feeling low for several weeks, it may be a sign that you are depressed. Depression can develop slowly and may be hard for you or your family to recognise at first. Other times, it can come on very suddenly, where you feel plunged into despair and feel rather hopeless.

If you have financial worries that are causing anxiety, contact the medical social worker in your hospital, your local DSP representative or a Citizens Information Centre.
Getting a cancer diagnosis is one of the most difficult things a person has to deal with. Cancer can cause stress and difficulties in a number of ways:

- Having pain that isn’t properly controlled
- Having physical discomfort or disability
- The feelings you have about having cancer
- The side-effects of some chemotherapy or other drug treatments
- Worries about money, work or family or other responsibilities
- The worry of having a diagnosis of advanced cancer

A person with cancer can also be vulnerable if they have any of the following:

- Past history of depression
- Past history of psychological problems
- Family history of depression
- Having a stress- or anxiety-prone personality
- Lack of a social support network – no family to rely on
- Not having someone to confide in
- Alcohol or drug problems

Diagnosing depression

Diagnosing depression in someone with cancer is not easy. It can often be hard to separate the signs of depression from the side-effects of treatment. This is because some signs of depression, such as tiredness, loss of interest and poor appetite, can be caused by other things, including cancer treatments like chemotherapy. It’s important to recognise the signs of depression so you can get support and treatment sooner rather than later. If you are feeling low or have any of the signs listed below for more than 2 weeks, tell your doctor or nurse.

Signs of depression

- A low mood for most of the time
- Loss of pleasure and interest in your favourite activities
- No motivation – no desire to go anywhere or start/finish jobs
- Feeling worse in the mornings
- Changed sleeping pattern – problems getting to sleep or waking early
Antidepressant therapy

Sometimes there may be no signs that your mood is improving. If you are finding it difficult to get over a period of depression, your doctor may suggest a treatment. Often a course of antidepressant drugs lasting 6 months can be helpful. These drugs affect the levels of important chemicals in your brain so that they can lift your spirits.

Antidepressants work slowly, so it may take at least 2 weeks before you notice any improvement. Over the next 3 to 4 weeks the benefits will build up. It is important to stick with the drug for a while before stopping or changing it. If you have a bad reaction to a particular drug, your doctor may have to try other drugs to find one that suits you best. Your doctor will advise you to keep taking the medication until you have been back to your usual self for at least 3 months or sometimes longer.

When you start to feel better and no longer need them, your doctor will reduce the dose and stop the drug gradually. If you stop too soon, it increases the chance of the depression coming back. Also, don’t stop your treatment suddenly as you may feel physically unwell. Some antidepressants stay in your body for a while and need to be gradually reduced.

In general, antidepressants are not addictive, so it’s unlikely that you will become addicted to them. Most people take them for around 4 to 6 months.

Like all medicines antidepressants do have side-effects. However, these are usually mild and tend to be a problem only during the first few weeks of treatment. The most common side-effects are:

- Feelings of sickness (nausea)
- Headaches
- Drowsiness
- A dry mouth

If these side-effects are upsetting you, tell your doctor. He or she may change you to a different treatment. But try to cope and continue treatment if you can. The benefits in the long term are greater than the inconvenience of the early side-effects.

Dealing with depression

It’s important to remember that depression can be successfully treated. It’s not a sign of weakness or failure to suffer from depression or to ask for help. As well as getting professional help, there are some things you can do by yourself that may help, called self-help strategies, which may help you feel in control and improve your self-esteem. See page 30 for more details.

If you feel that your low moods are getting the better of you, talk to someone close to you who is a good listener. It is not always easy to talk about emotional problems. Often they can be hard to share with loved ones. If you feel comfortable discussing personal worries with your doctor or nurse or another healthcare professional, they may be able to help you. Talking to a counsellor or psychotherapist, who is not personally involved in your situation, can be a great help. They can help you to make sense of your thoughts, feelings and ideas.

Many cancer support services have a counsellor who can talk to you. See page 57 for more about cancer support services. You can also call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700, drop into a Daffodil Centre or visit www.cancer.ie/how-we-can-help for more advice.
Herbal remedies
Some herbal remedies may be helpful. In recent years St John’s Wort has been promoted as a treatment for mild depression. However, before you decide to use any herbal remedies, you should discuss it with your doctor. St John’s Wort can have harmful interactions with some medications and is now only available on prescription.

Referral to a psychiatrist
Some doctors treat depression themselves while others may prefer to refer you to a psychiatrist. If you are referred to a psychiatrist, it does not mean that your doctor thinks you’re going mad or that you can’t help yourself. A psychiatrist has special expertise in helping people who are depressed. On your first visit, the psychiatrist will ask you questions about how the depression developed, how it is affecting you, and the treatments you have tried. Once the psychiatrist has a picture of your depression, he or she can suggest other treatments. There is no set number of times that you should visit the psychiatrist. You may need to go several times or only once. After your first visit, the psychiatrist may think that a talking therapy is the best treatment for you. He or she may advise you to see a counsellor, psychologist or psychotherapist. See page 41 for more details about professional help.

Remember that you will recover from depression, even if you think it unlikely at the time. When feeling depressed, it can be hard to see things positively and be hopeful. However, depression does not last forever. Even with no treatment, your mood will eventually improve, but it may take much longer. Self-help strategies, talking therapies or antidepressants can all help to speed up your recovery.

Suicidal feelings
Sometimes depression can become very severe. People may begin to think that their life is not worth living and that they would be better off dead. Or else they may feel they are a burden to their family and it would be better for everyone if they were dead.

If you often have thoughts of suicide or you find yourself making plans for how to go about it, tell your doctor, nurse, a relevant healthcare professional or someone close to you immediately.

Your doctor may suggest that you spend a few days in hospital where you will get the necessary help and support for you to recover quickly. You will be able to talk about your ideas and feelings at this time with specially trained staff. More than likely you will need medication.

You should seek help immediately if you experience, or if your family and friends are worried that you are experiencing, the following:

- Suicidal thoughts or plans
- Wanting to harm yourself
- Seeing or hearing things that are not real (hallucinations)
- Strongly believing things that are not true (delusions)

You will recover from depression, even if you think it unlikely at the time.

Depression in children and teenagers
A small number of children and teenagers with cancer can become depressed. For that reason you should watch out for signs that your child is becoming depressed. He or she may become quiet or moody or have eating or sleep problems. In some cases they may become uncooperative with cancer treatments.

Anxiety usually occurs in younger children, while depression is more common in teenagers. Some signs of depression can happen as a response to normal development. Teenage years can be hard even for children who do not have a serious illness. So it’s important to find out if the signs are related to depression or to a stage of development.

If you notice that your child is becoming depressed, get help for them without delay. There are very good treatments available. Individual and group counselling are often used as the first treatment for a child with depression.

If you are a teenager with cancer, you may find yourself feeling angry and frustrated. At this stage in your life it can be very hard to cope with a cancer diagnosis, especially when you want to become more independent.
You may resent having to rely on your parents and relatives because of your illness at this time. You may be suddenly jolted into thinking about your health when you were well and strong before. Overall, it can be a confusing time for you, with many different emotions to deal with. It’s normal to question your situation and why it has happened to you.

Coping with such strong feelings by yourself can often be hard. You may not find it easy to talk about such things, even with parents and close friends. If this happens, you may find it helpful to discuss your feelings with a trained counsellor. Another option is to contact a support group for young people with cancer, like CanTeen. This will give you a chance to talk to others who are perhaps in a similar situation. Call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 if you would like more advice, or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can also email the nurses at cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie

How to cope

Remember your emotional well-being is just as important as your physical health. Everyone needs some support during difficult times, especially when dealing with a serious illness. Having to face cancer is probably one of the most stressful situations you will ever have to face. There is no right or wrong way to cope. Only what is right for you. Give yourself plenty of time to adapt. Be patient and don’t expect too much too soon – have realistic expectations.

If some support services are not available in your area, find other ways to cope. Talk to your medical social worker or contact the Irish Cancer Society’s Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700. You can also contact a primary care social worker, if you have one. Be open to getting help and support from friends and neighbours. It is not a sign of failure to ask for help or to feel unable to cope on your own. Once other people understand how you are feeling, they can give you more support.

How can I cope with physical effects?

Fatigue

Fatigue or ongoing tiredness is a common problem for people undergoing cancer treatment. You may continue to feel quite tired even after treatment ends. It can take at least a year for your body to fully get over the effects of treatment. Fatigue is also common in those with anxiety and depression. Overall, your body may feel slowed up and not rested by sleep.
It’s important to talk to your doctor if your energy levels are low, so that he or she can identify the cause of your fatigue. Finding ways to relax, such as massage and gentle exercise, may help. See page 30 for more information on self-help strategies. As time goes on your energy levels should improve. A booklet called *Coping with Fatigue* is also available from the Irish Cancer Society, which you may find useful.

Take all the time you need to get back to your normal routine with work. Just do as much as you feel comfortable with. If you are studying, you may find it hard to concentrate. You may find it helpful to limit your studies until you feel stronger. Or when you decide to return to work, begin with reduced hours, for example, mornings or afternoons only. Gradually build up your hours until you feel comfortable working a full day.

### Sleep problems

During your illness there may be times when you find it difficult to sleep. Often this is because you are anxious about treatment or worried about the future. Not being able to fall asleep may be the hardest part. If you find it hard to sleep at night, tell your doctor, nurse or a relevant healthcare professional. If you are depressed, you may find that you wake early and then cannot get back to sleep. Sleeping tablets generally do not solve this problem, but here are some suggestions that might help.

**Tips & Hints – fatigue**

- Stop before you feel overtired.
- Build rest periods into your day.
- Ask for help around the house or at work.
- If you are going somewhere special, have a rest before you go out.
- Save your energy for doing the things you most enjoy.

**Sleep problems**

If you cannot get any sleep at night your body will still get some benefit from lying quietly in bed, resting. Although you may feel as if you have been awake all night, you may well have managed to have several hours of good-quality sleep. If nothing else works, your doctor may prescribe a short course of mild sleeping tablets for you.

Older people and those not physically active during the day need less sleep at night. If you are taking frequent naps during the day and having problems sleeping at night, you may not need so much rest. Limit yourself to one rest or sleep each day to see if it helps.

If you get help in coping with some of the emotional effects of cancer, your sleep pattern may improve as you learn how to deal with your feelings and emotions. Call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre if you would like more advice.

**Appetite**

Some chemotherapy drugs can reduce your appetite. Also, if you are anxious or depressed, your appetite may be affected. This may mean that you either eat less or more and as a result lose or put on weight.
In general it’s best to eat a balanced diet, with plenty of fruit and vegetables. However, this may not always be possible depending on your treatment and emotional state. If you are depressed and have a huge appetite, you may need to restrict your intake of carbohydrates and certain foods such as chocolate. Our booklet *Diet and Cancer* has helpful tips on diet and boosting appetite. Call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 for a free copy or visit a Daffodil Centre. You can also download the booklet at [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie).

**Pain**

Sometimes with anxiety or depression you can become more sensitive to pain. In fact, strong emotions make pain harder to bear and may affect you more. For this reason it is important to deal with your emotions or seek treatment for your anxiety or depression. Treatment can help to reduce your pain as well as improve your mood. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you are having problems with pain control.

Breathing exercises may also help relieve pain. When in pain, we tend to hold our breath or breathe in a shallow and rapid way. If you change your breathing pattern and breathe more deeply and slowly, your muscles will relax. Focusing on your breathing may also distract you from the pain.

**Tips & Hints – eating & digestion**

- Avoid eating or preparing food when you feel sick.
- Avoid fried foods, fatty foods or foods with a strong smell.
- Eat cold or warm food if the smell of hot food makes you feel sick.
- Eat several small snacks and meals each day, and chew food well.
- Have a small meal a few hours before treatment, but don’t eat just before treatment.
- Avoid dehydration. Drink lots of fluid slowly every day, taking small sips.
- Avoid filling your stomach with lots of liquid just before you eat.
- If you feel sick or vomit, tell your doctor as soon as possible. He or she can prescribe anti-sickness drugs that usually work well.

**Loss of interest in sex**

Cancer treatments can affect some people’s sex lives. Any changes are usually temporary and should not have any long-term effects. For example, there may be times when you just feel tired or perhaps not strong enough for the level of physical activity you are used to during sex. Anxiety may play a part in losing interest in sex too. Often this anxiety is about your chances of surviving cancer, or how your family is coping with your illness, or about your finances. Your emotions may be turned upside down and you may find it hard to relax. If you are feeling low or depressed, you may also lose the desire for sex.

**Change in body image**

If you have had surgery that has changed your body image, you may feel self-conscious or vulnerable. You may be afraid that your partner – or a future one – will be put off by the changes to your body. You may feel your identity has changed if you have had a breast or testicle removed, or have a colostomy where your bowel now opens onto the surface of your tummy. Losing your hair or having a central line in place for chemotherapy may also change the way you feel about yourself.

You may not want anyone to see or touch your body. It’s normal to feel that way and it can take some time to get used to your new image. It’s important to remember that you don’t have to deal with this on your own, unless you really want to. Though the saying ‘it will get better with time’ may seem unhelpful, it’s actually true.

It can be hard to discuss this intimate part of your life. If you have a supportive partner, talking about your feelings may help ease your anxiety. Your partner may have worries too and be waiting for a sign that you are ready to discuss them. It may reassure your partner to hear that your lack of interest in sex is not a sign of less affection or respect on your part. Even if you do not feel like having sex, you can still enjoy a close and loving relationship with your partner. Don’t feel guilty or embarrassed to talk to your doctor or nurse about what is troubling you. Knowing how sensitive this issue can be, he or she will only be glad to help you. Your doctor may refer you to a specialist counsellor, such as a psychosexual counsellor, if you think that would be helpful.
No one can be positive all the time. It is natural to feel low or upset or have negative thoughts when coping with a serious illness such as cancer. When you talk to other people with cancer, even the most positive of them will admit to feeling depressed and anxious at times. Don’t feel that you should put on a brave face when you’re really finding it tough. If all you want to do is cry, then go ahead. Tears are a natural response to distress.

What does being ‘positive’ mean?

Having a positive attitude does not mean being cheerful and happy all the time. Accepting that you get low moods is part of being positive. Being positive also means taking an active interest in your treatment. And also accepting that there are ups and downs of treatment. It’s a positive thing to admit that you feel tired, lonely, anxious, depressed or angry. Facing the issues – such as deciding on treatment or making a will – rather than choosing not to deal with them is an act of great bravery and courage. By keeping an open mind it means that you are ready for the ups and downs.

Positive thinking means different things to different people. Certainly it involves facing up to cancer in some way. Because there is no one right way to deal with cancer, people do this in different ways.

- Some people take an active part in their treatment, read all they can, surf the internet, and talk to lots of people.
- Some people are happy to let the doctors and nurses give the treatment and trust them to do their best.
- Some people want life to continue as normal as possible. They avoid thinking about, discussing or talking about their illness and its treatment.

Having cancer may bring great changes to your life. There will be real losses for you and naturally this will affect you. It’s true that there are negative aspects to cancer. You have a right to worry and get upset over them. But it’s important to try not to dwell on them,
but to move on and adjust to your situation. Remember that you will feel better as time passes and your feelings and thoughts will fade. If you find it hard to talk openly to family members or friends, it may help to look elsewhere. Call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre if you would like more advice or to talk confidence. You can also ask for a free copy of our booklet *Who Can Ever Understand? Talking about Your Cancer* or download it at [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie).

**Humour and laughter**

It’s widely believed that humour and laughter can boost your immune system. When dealing with cancer, laughter has relieved stress and tension in some people. If humour has helped you cope with stressful situations in the past, then it will certainly help you deal with cancer now.

Laughing at it may help to reduce its importance and the size of the threat. Watching funny films or cartoons may also be good for you.

Encourage friends who make you laugh to visit you. However, if humour has not helped you in the past, it may not be the right time to start now.

>> Laughter is the best medicine.

**Get information about your cancer and treatment**

Learning more about cancer and treatment may help to relieve anxiety for some people. Information can help you overcome your fears about what will happen to you. It can also make you feel more in control of your illness. There are many people and ways to help you find information. These include:

- Your hospital doctors and nurses
- Your GP
- Hospital-based medical social workers and community primary care social workers
- Friends and family
- Patient booklets and leaflets (see page 58)
- Bookshops and local libraries
- The internet
- Support groups
- Irish Cancer Society Cancer Nurseline 1800 200 700
- Daffodil Centres (see page 55 for more details)

Ask your nurses and doctors for information, even if they look busy. It is okay if you ask the same questions over and over. It is also important to ask your doctor regularly about your progress. This will give him or her a chance to reassure you about your illness, or to talk about delays or changes in your treatment.

Get your information from reliable sources like [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie). Be wary of promises of miracle cures or scare stories that you find online. If you’re not sure about something, ask your doctor or call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700.

**Talk things through**

Talking is one of the best cures if you’re anxious or depressed. Bottling up your feelings does no one any good in the long term. But sometimes it’s not easy to talk. You may feel awkward or embarrassed discussing your feelings. Or else you may think that no one can understand what you are going through. Even if you believe that nobody understands, unless you speak up, they will be unable to help you.

**Who should I talk to?**

Talking with your partner, or a close friend or relative, can help you feel a lot better. Often they can comfort and reassure you in ways no one else can. You may find that you have to make the first move though. You can help relieve their fears by talking openly about your illness, its treatment, your needs and your feelings. And you can correct mistaken ideas or views your family and friends might have.

Sometimes those closest to you may not be the best people to talk to. You may not want to upset them or put them in an ‘awkward position’. Sometimes the best person is just a good listener, someone to hear your thoughts without both of you feeling uncomfortable.
If you feel unable to talk to your partner or a friend, you could ask your cancer specialist or GP for help. He or she can put you in touch with a counsellor or a counselling organisation, or they may recommend a more intensive talking treatment like psychotherapy. This can help people to recognise, understand and deal with their feelings. Specific types of psychotherapy, or ‘talk’ therapy, also can relieve depression. See page 43 for more details.

Tips & Hints – expressing your feelings
- Acknowledge any strong emotions – your own or your listener’s. For example, if you feel angry or very sad.
- Describe your feelings rather than simply displaying them.
- Don’t feel guilty or ‘wrong’ about the way you feel – these feelings are normal.
- Tell the person how much he or she means to you.
- It’s okay to admit that you are uncertain about the future.
- Don’t force yourself to speak when you don’t want to. You may just want to hold someone’s hand or get a hug.
- Everybody has some regrets. Regrets are reduced when they are shared.
- It’s good to cry.

Keep a diary or journal
Keeping a diary is a practical way to help you express your feelings, especially if you find it hard to talk about them with other people. It can help if you write down all your fears and worries. It is useful to record both emotions and facts – what happened to you and how you feel. For example, you could record details of your treatment and when you’ve been feeling ill or tired.

Writing about your experiences is a good way to free yourself from any negative feelings you may have. Some days you may feel you have nothing to write about, but put down whatever comes into your head. Getting into the habit of writing every day can boost your spirits in the long term. As your diary develops, you may begin to see your thoughts and feelings in a different light that is no longer stressful. You can look back and see how you coped during low or anxious periods. You may even be pleased to see how well you’ve coped.

Do things for yourself
During your illness, you may feel that your life is beyond your control. By doing things for yourself, it can help to make you feel more independent and in control. Try to live life as fully as you can. You might want to learn relaxation or meditation techniques, or even take up a new hobby. Do things that make you feel good and are fun, as it will boost your self-esteem.

Avoid boredom
You may find that you have a lot of time on your hands during your treatment. If you previously led an active life, lying in bed or sitting in a chair doing nothing can be boring. Boredom can lead to anxiety or depression. It could be helpful to see this time for yourself as a gift to be cherished.

There are many ways that you can occupy your mind. Watching TV, listening to music or the radio, or chatting to a friend, can all be welcome distractions. Make a plan of all the things you would like to achieve in life, no matter how big or small. Set yourself tasks each day. Keep a diary, meditate, start a photo album. Depending on your energy levels, you may need help with some tasks like gardening or a new hobby. Ask for help if you are feeling bored – friends love to feel useful.

Take exercise
Exercise is a helpful activity for many people with cancer. It can improve your energy levels, reduce fatigue (feeling very tired), boost your immune system and your sense of well-being. The benefits of exercise on mood are also well known, so try to get regular exercise or just ‘keep moving’ as much as possible.

Exercise can have a positive effect on your physical health. Not only can it improve the side-effects of treatment but also prevent long-term effects and in some cases may reduce the likelihood of the cancer returning.
There is no set amount of exercise suggested for a person with cancer. The type and amount that is right for you will depend on your ability. In general 30 minutes of moderate activity every day will help.

Ask your doctor first before you engage in any sport or physical activity and don’t push yourself beyond your limits. Try walking, swimming or cycling if you can. If you are undergoing treatment or have advanced cancer, exercise can often feel overwhelming. But even simple stretches or a short walk may help you feel better. Low levels of exercise will still release natural chemicals in your body that improve mood and well-being.

Join a self-help group or support group

Joining a self-help group or support group has many benefits. It’s a great way to find out information and express your fears. Groups offer a chance to talk to other people who may be in a similar situation and facing the same challenges as you. If you live alone or feel unable to talk about your feelings with your loved ones, a support group can be a neutral zone. Support groups can be a useful and sociable way to share experiences, learn from others, and discuss your own ways of coping. Attending a support group may reduce the possibility of you developing depression.

If you feel depressed and lonely during your illness, support groups can help relieve your feelings of isolation and loneliness. Research has shown that people with cancer in support groups found it improved their mood, helped them to cope better with day-to-day challenges, and reduced their pain.

Not everyone finds support groups helpful or finds it easy to talk in a group, so a support group might not be for you. If you’re not sure, it may be worth going along to see what the group is like first and then make a decision. For more about local support groups, see page 57.

Release tension

There may be times when you feel you are ready to explode. Things may get on top of you and you need to let off steam. Or else if your pent-up feelings are not released you might say or do something you might later regret. Sometimes releasing tension even for a few minutes can be beneficial.

Some ways to help release emotions include:

- A good scream
- Thumping a cushion or pillow
- Having a good cry
- Turning the radio or CD player up very loud
- Writing things down

Don’t worry what your neighbours will think or say. None of these quick actions will do anyone any harm. In fact, they may leave you feeling much better.

Relax, visualise or meditate

Finding ways to relax, visualise or meditate will help ease your fears and anxieties. The positive effects of these methods have been well researched. They may also help with pain and other symptoms too. You may need some instruction or guidance with these methods at first, but after a while you should be able to do them by yourself.

Give them a try, but they may not suit everyone.

Relaxation

Relaxing every day even for 10 minutes is a good way to help you cope with the emotional effects of cancer. There are many ways to relax. You may have your own favourites, such as quietly listening to music or yoga.

Relaxation is a skill and needs practice. Some people may not find it easy to do at first. If you feel you are getting anxious about relaxing, take a break and come back to it later when you feel calmer. Books, tapes and classes can also show you how to relax.

Relaxation therapy involves learning how to ‘switch on’ the relaxation response by a series of mental and physical exercises. By listening to tape recordings most people can learn to feel more relaxed in response to thinking trigger words such as ‘one two three, relax’. This can help you feel more in control.

Focused breathing exercises also play a role in reducing stress. They help relaxation and raise your body’s level of endorphins, which are natural chemicals that boost your mood and sense of well-being. Progressive muscle relaxation involves using groups of muscles around your body and learning to tense and relax them.
Visualisation therapy and imagery

Using your imagination to help healing can be beneficial. Many experts believe that imagery is the method by which the mind talks to the body. Both visualisation therapy and imagery can boost the feeling of being in control. This in turn may have an effect on your immune system and promote healing. Research has shown that imagery helps manage stress, anxiety and depression. It can also lower blood pressure, pain and the side-effects of chemotherapy.

Visualisation is a technique where you form pictures in your mind and use them to make you feel less upset or sad. Some people find it helpful to visualise their white blood cells attacking their cancer. Or each day you could imagine your tumour shrinking bit by bit. Don’t worry if you find it hard to form clear images. This does not make the therapy less effective.

Imagery involves mental exercises that help your mind influence the wellbeing of your body. There are many imagery techniques, for example, palming. Here you place the palms of your hands over your eyes and imagine a colour you associate with anxiety or stress (for example, red). You then imagine a colour you associate with relaxation or calmness (for example, blue). By picturing a calming colour, it is believed that you will become more relaxed.

Another technique is called guided imagery. This involves visualising a specific image or goal to be achieved and then imagining achieving that goal. Athletes often use this technique to improve their performance.

How to relieve stress and relax

- Lie down in a quiet room.
- Take a slow, deep breath.
- As you breathe in, tense a particular muscle or group of muscles.
- Clench your teeth or stiffen your arms or legs.
- Keep your muscles tense for a second or two while holding your breath.
- Then breathe out, release the tension, and let your body relax completely.
- Repeat the process with another muscle or muscle group and continue on through your body.

Meditation

Meditation also helps to calm your mind. There are many types of meditation – all aimed at you being ‘at peace’ with yourself. Indeed the benefits of meditation are many.

Not only can it give you a sense of well-being, it can also help to reduce anxiety, help sleep and fatigue problems and boost your immune system. You may also be able to cope better with the side-effects of treatment.

Meditation can be practised by anyone, at any age and of any religion. It can also be practised anywhere – travelling to the hospital, during chemotherapy sessions or in the privacy of your own home. However, the best place is probably somewhere that you won’t be disturbed or distracted.

- Pick a quiet place.
- Sit quietly and comfortably.
- Avoid lying down, crossing your legs or linking your fingers.
- Close your eyes.
- Be aware of your breathing, but don’t try to control it.
- Let your thoughts flow into your mind.
- Be aware of your breathing and surroundings – breathe naturally.
- Pick a word, such as ‘one’ or ‘blue’, and keep repeating it if your mind wanders or is distracted by other thoughts.
- If you find it hard to concentrate on your breathing, put an object in front of you and focus on that.
- Finish by sitting quietly for a few moments with your eyes closed.

Getting used to meditating can be hard at first. You may think it is not working if you feel your mind is busy and your thoughts racing all the time. This is normal and it will become easier the more you practise. Letting go of any distressing or depressing thoughts for a short time once or twice each day can greatly help you. It is a good idea to practise meditation regularly and have guidance from an experienced meditator.

Depending on your beliefs, your religious leader may be able to help and advise you too.
Understanding the emotional effects of cancer

Try other complementary therapies
Other complementary therapies such as massage, acupuncture, aromatherapy, hypnotherapy or reflexology may suit you. These therapies also may help you feel in control of your cancer.

Be careful when choosing a therapy or therapist. Some therapists may promise a cure or charge a lot of money. Make sure the therapist is registered and recommended, and research the evidence about the benefits of a particular therapy. Our booklet, *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies* has information on common complementary and alternative therapies. Call our Cancer Nurseline or visit a Daffodil Centre for a free copy, or download it from [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

It’s also a good idea to let your doctors know before starting complementary therapies. Don’t be afraid to talk about them. They may be able to offer advice or recommend a trusted practitioner. See page 44 for more information on complementary therapies. You can also call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre for advice.

Avoid alcohol or drugs

It is best to avoid using alcohol or drugs to try and cope. Often they can interfere with your medication and harm you physically, socially and psychologically. Because alcohol is a depressant, rather than lift your mood it can have the opposite effect and make you feel even lower.

Taking recreational drugs may make you feel better for a short time, but they can damage your health in the long term. Alcohol and drugs may also damage your relationships with your family and close friends at a time when you need them most.

Email cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie

What if I need professional help?

Sometimes your emotions may be too strong to cope with by yourself. Nothing you do or say may improve how you feel. If your emotions are stopping you from carrying out normal activities, such as eating or sleeping, or affect the quality of your life, you should ask for help. Don’t feel that your emotions are trivial or less important than your physical symptoms. Above all, don’t feel guilty, embarrassed or disappointed that you have to ask for help. It’s also important to listen to what your family and friends are saying, especially if they think you need help. Sometimes people don’t realise they have become depressed until told so by their doctor.

What kind of help do I need?

At first it may be hard to know what kind of help you need. However, there are a number of people in the hospital and in the community who can give you professional help. The healthcare team is especially there to give you support during your illness and recovery.

Talk to your cancer specialist or GP about your anxiety, low moods or strong emotions. Bring along a family member or close friend as he or she can remind you of anything you might forget. Tell the doctor exactly how you feel and focus on what concerns you the most. For example, if you have no desire to get out of bed or wash every day. The doctor will decide which kind of therapy you need and give you advice. If you are unhappy with your diagnosis or the treatment your doctor has advised, you can always get a second opinion.

Psycho-oncology services

In some larger hospitals there are special units that provide psycho-oncology services. This means that you can get emotional and psychological care and support during your diagnosis, treatment and recovery by a team of experts. Usually the team consists of psychiatrists, psychologists, nurses and medical social workers working closely together.
Who can help me?

There are many people in the healthcare team who can help you to cope with your feelings and emotions:

**Counsellor** – A counsellor is trained to help people talk through their problems and adapt to their situation. In most cases, they do not give advice or answers but guide you until you find the answers within yourself.

**Clinical / counselling psychologist** – A clinical / counselling psychologist is specialised in the treatment of anxiety and depression using talking therapies. They are trained to explore what people think, feel and do, especially in stressful situations. They can help you find ways to confront your fears or improve your situation. Usually they are based in the hospital.

**Oncologist/cancer specialist** – An oncologist is a medical doctor who specialises in the treatment of cancer. Oncologists have some experience helping patients deal with the emotional effects of cancer. However, they usually prefer for you to discuss your feelings and emotions with a clinical psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor or your GP.

**Clinical nurse specialist/oncology liaison nurse** – These are hospital-based nurses who can help you with all aspects of your cancer. You can tell them if you are having any problems coping, especially if you are in distress. They can advise you to talk to your cancer specialist about further therapy.

**Psychiatrist** – A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specialises in depression and emotional illness. The psychiatrist may prescribe antidepressants and/or recommend talking therapy.

**Medical social worker** – A medical social worker is trained to help you deal with any emotional problems or social needs related to your cancer. They can provide support and counselling to you and your family and also advice on practical and financial supports and services available when you go home.

**Psychotherapist** – A psychotherapist specialises in psychotherapy. This is a therapy which explores emotional issues that result in feelings of anxiety and depression. Psychotherapists help with problem solving and can help you and your family to develop more coping skills.

Understanding the emotional effects of cancer

Usually you will only need to see one or two professionals. For example, you may need to see both a psychiatrist and a counsellor for a short while.

**Seeing a psychiatrist**

If your GP or cancer specialist decides to refer you to a psychiatrist, it does not mean that there is anything seriously wrong with you. You may benefit from seeing a psychiatrist for any of the following reasons:

- If you have severe anxiety or depression
- To help if there are problems with your medication
- To arrange talking therapies for you
- If, after a course of treatment, you are unable to stop antidepressants without depression coming back.

**Types of therapy**

If you seek professional help, there are many therapies to help you deal with strong emotions. Some focus on talking, while others focus on the relationship between the mind and the body to overcome anxiety and depression. Some therapies just involve you and the counsellor, or another type of therapist. Some therapies like group and family therapy involve going to counselling with others, to share feelings and support each other.

Sometimes it may take a while to find a therapy that suits you. Give the therapy a few weeks before you make any decision. If you feel that it’s not helping or it’s making things worse, a different type of therapy might work better for you. Talk to your doctor or therapist if you want to change.

**Finding a therapist**

It’s important to find a therapist you feel happy with. Don’t be afraid to go to another therapist or ask to see someone else if you feel it would be better for you.

Check that any therapist you see is professionally qualified, legitimate and comes recommended. There can be a big difference in the experience and qualifications of therapists. Your hospital team or GP can help you to find someone with the right training.
Many people find that complementary therapies are very helpful in a number of ways. You may feel more positive about yourself and your illness. You may be better able to cope with the physical side-effects of cancer and the distressing emotions that cancer can often bring.

Some complementary therapies also focus on the spiritual dimension of a person.

Sometimes hypnotherapy and biofeedback can help if you have anxiety or depression.

**Hypnotherapy**

Hypnotherapy is a mind–body therapy which can be used to help patients reduce pain, stress and depression, and calm their fears and anxiety. A hypnotherapist guides you to contact your subconscious mind so that emotional and physical changes can happen. It is not a medical treatment for cancer, although there is some evidence that it may help your immune system and have a role in managing cancer.

Hypnosis is a state of deep relaxation, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness. However, when you are in that state you can still concentrate on memories, sensations or other things. During hypnosis you may be given suggestions that could help to alter your perception of pain and strengthen your coping abilities. There is evidence that hypnosis can reduce chronic cancer pain and help ease nausea.

Hypnosis may not be suitable for everyone. It usually needs the trust and imagination of the patient. Nine out of 10 people can reach a hypnotic state but it will not work if you resist it. Self-hypnosis can also be learned simply.

**Biofeedback**

Biofeedback is another mind–body therapy. It is a technique to train your mind to control the way your body works. It guides you to use willpower to control body processes that normally are automatic. For example, usually you have no control over how fast your heart beats or how quickly you breathe.

Biofeedback reduces anxiety and the severity and occurrence of tension headaches and chronic pain. It has not been found to affect cancer cells. Biofeedback usually takes place in a hospital or clinic.
During biofeedback, a person is monitored with electrodes connected to electronic equipment that measure:

- Breath rate
- Perspiration
- Skin temperature
- Blood pressure
- Heartbeat

The results can be seen on a computer screen and give a picture of how your body responds to stresses. The biofeedback technician may advise you about physical and mental exercises that can teach you how to relax and so change the functions being measured.

**Alternative therapies**

Alternative therapies are generally treatments that are used instead of conventional treatments. These therapies include diet therapy, megavitamin therapy and herbalism.

Alternative therapies have not been scientifically proven. Some alternative therapies may even harm your health. Always talk to your doctor if you are considering an alternative to conventional treatment.

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**If you decide to have complementary or alternative treatments**

Before you decide to change your treatment or add any methods of your own, talk to your doctor or nurse. Some methods can be safely used along with standard medical treatment. But others can interfere with standard treatment or cause serious side-effects. For that reason, it’s important to talk openly with the doctors and nurses caring for you if you are thinking of having treatment with either a complementary or alternative practitioner.

Don’t be afraid that your doctor will be offended by your wish for other treatments. In fact, he or she may be able to recommend therapies that could be safe and useful for you and give you the name of a trusted, well-qualified practitioner.

Be careful about choosing a practitioner. Don’t be misled by promises of cures. At present in Ireland, this area is not fully regulated. Make sure that the practitioners you plan to visit are properly qualified and have a good reputation. Check to see if they belong to a professional body or not. If you are unsure but would like to know what other patients have found helpful, contact your doctor or a patient support group. Also, it is important to make sure that the practitioner is charging a fair price for your treatment.

More information is available in a free booklet from the Irish Cancer Society called *Understanding Cancer and Complementary Therapies*. If you would like a copy or more advice, call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700, drop into a Daffodil Centre or visit [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)
Can spirituality and religion help me?

Sometimes people with cancer cope better when they have spiritual support. When dealing with a serious illness, you may start to think about the meaning and purpose of life. You may be afraid that you are going to die, even if your treatment is going well and your doctor has reassured you.

Spirituality can be a way to find strength and meaning in times of stress. Spiritual support can be given through prayer or the guidance of your chaplain, pastor, rabbi, healer, imam or other religious leader.

Talking to your leader or a member of your religious faith can be helpful in this situation. If you like, ask a relevant healthcare professional, a family member or friend to arrange a meeting.

Spiritual support

Having a religious faith may give you hope and reduce feelings of helplessness. As a result, you may be more inclined to have positive moods. In fact, research has shown that it can reduce depression, improve coping and boost your quality of life. Spiritual support may help to raise your energy levels too. Believing in a personal god can also make you feel that you are not facing cancer alone. It may also help you realise what’s important in life for you.

If you have friends who belong to a church or prayer group, ask them to pray for you. Knowing that people are praying for you because you are much loved may bring you peace and solace. It is another way to help people feel useful and supportive and may bring you a little comfort too.

Spirituality is a way to find strength and meaning in times of stress. Spirituality and religion don’t suit everyone. If you don’t want this kind of support, there are many other types of support that can help you to find comfort and strength.

How can I support my family?

Looking after or supporting a family can be hard work even when you are well. Trying to juggle the roles of father, mother, daughter, son or breadwinner at the same time as coping with cancer may seem impossible. It is important to be realistic about what you can manage, and to seek help from your partner, family or friends before things become overwhelming.

You might need to give up some or all of your responsibilities for a short period of time. That way you can concentrate on yourself and your recovery. If you have strong emotions, or anxiety, it may be necessary to give up your role as breadwinner for your family, or as carer for an ageing parent, until you feel better. As a parent, you may not be able to do all the things you usually do for your children. This does not mean that you have failed them in any way, but that you must plan your time and save your energy for the most important tasks.

It is important to talk openly with your partner or family. They may be feeling the same way, but may wish not to upset you by bringing up awkward subjects.

How can my family and friends help?

Families and friends can support you in different ways. Some family members and friends can offer a listening ear and give advice if needed. Others may gather up-to-date information on cancer to know what you can expect and what you are going through. Others again may prefer to help you in a practical way with travelling to and from the hospital, with childcare, cooking, shopping or housework. It may take time to know which way suits you and your family or friends best.

Email cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie
Talking to children and teenagers

A cancer diagnosis can affect a whole family. Every family deals with cancer in its own way.

You may feel that you don’t want your illness to upset family life, upset that you can’t do activities with your children, or that you’re letting them down. You may also worry about the emotional impact your illness will have on your children, especially older children, who may already be struggling with the difficult changes that adolescence can bring. These are all natural feelings to have at this time.

Should I tell my children about my cancer?

You may feel it’s best not to tell your children anything. You may be worried about what to say or how they will react. But keeping your illness a secret may not be the best approach. Children and teenagers can often sense that there is a problem. If no one explains to them why things have changed, they may imagine something worse or blame themselves. By talking openly you can answer their questions and help them to cope with their emotions. If you try to protect them by saying nothing, they may still hear about it from someone outside the family or their immediate network.

How can I tell my children I have cancer?

It’s best that you or your partner tell your children about your cancer diagnosis. If this is not possible, then someone else close to your children could talk with them.

How you discuss your cancer with them will depend on their age and character. Our booklet *Talking to Children about Cancer. A Guide for Parents* gives practical advice for talking to children about cancer, with specific advice for different age groups. It also has information on supporting children and teenagers and helping them to deal with their emotions.

The booklet is available free of charge from Daffodil Centres or by calling the Cancer Nurseline. It’s also available on our website [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie).
A diagnosis of cancer often means that you will have extra expenses, like car parking during hospital visits, medication, travel, heating and childcare costs. If you can’t work or you are unemployed, this may cause even more stress. It may be harder for you to deal with cancer if you are worried about money.

**Medical expenses**

Medical expenses that you might have to pay include:
- Visits to your family doctor (GP)
- Visits to hospital
- Overnight stays in hospital
- Medicines
- Appliances, like wigs

How much you pay towards your medical expenses depends on whether or not you qualify for a medical card and what type of health insurance you have, if any.

If you have a medical card, you will probably have very little to pay for hospital and GP (family doctor) care or your medication.

Medical cards are usually for people on low incomes, but sometimes a card can be given even if your income is above the limit. For example, if you have a large amount of medical expenses. This is known as a discretionary medical card.

An emergency medical card may be issued if you are terminally ill and in palliative care, irrespective of your income.

If you do not have a medical card you will have to pay some of the cost of your care and medication.

If you have health insurance the insurance company will pay some of the costs, but the amount will depend on your insurance plan. It’s important to contact your insurance company before starting treatment.
Benefits and allowances

There are benefits available from the Department of Social Protection that can help people who are ill and their family. For example, Illness Benefit, Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Partial Capacity Benefit, Carer’s Allowance, Carer’s Benefit and Carer’s Leave.

If you want more information on benefits and allowances, contact:

- The medical social worker in the hospital you are attending
- Citizens Information – Tel: 0761 074 000
- Department of Social Protection (DSP) – Tel: 1890 662 244 or ask to speak to a DSP representative at your local health centre or DSP office.

Always have your PPS number to hand when you are asking about entitlements and benefits. It’s also a good idea to photocopy completed forms before posting them.

If you have financial difficulties

If you are getting into debt or you are in debt, the Money Advice and Budgeting Service (MABS) can help you. MABS can look at your situation, work out your budget, help you to deal with your debts and manage your payments. The service is free and confidential. Call the MABS Helpline 0761 07 2000 for information.

If you are finding it hard to cope financially, contact your medical social worker in the hospital or your local health centre for advice. The Irish Cancer Society can also give some help towards travel costs in certain cases. See page 56 for more details of our Volunteer Driving Service and the Travel2Care fund.

You can also call our Cancer Nurseline 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre and the nurse will suggest ways to help you manage.

More information

For more information please see our booklet, Managing the Financial Impact of Cancer – A Guide for Patients and their Families.

Irish Cancer Society services

Our Cancer Support Department provides a range of cancer support services for people with cancer, at home and in hospital, including:

- Cancer Nurseline
- Daffodil Centres
- Survivor Support
- Support in your area
- Patient travel and financial support services
- Night nursing
- Publications and website information

- Our Cancer Nurseline Freephone 1800 200 700. Call our Cancer Nurseline and speak to one of our cancer nurses for confidential advice, support and information. You can also email us on cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie or visit our Online Community at www.cancer.ie

For the deaf community, our Cancer Nurseline is using the Sign Language Interpreting Service (SLIS) using IRIS. Contact IRIS by text 087 980 6996 or email: remote@slis.ie

- Our Daffodil Centres. Visit our Daffodil Centres, located in thirteen hospitals nationwide. The centres are staffed by cancer nurses and
Local cancer support services

The Irish Cancer Society works with cancer support services all over Ireland. They have a range of services for cancer patients and their families, during and after treatment, many of which are free. For example:

- **Professional counselling** (the Irish Cancer Society funds up to 8 sessions of free counselling in many affiliated support services)
- **Support groups**, often led by professionals like social workers, counsellors, psychologists, or cancer nurses
- **Special exercise programmes**, like the Irish Cancer Society’s *Strides for Life* walking group programme
- **Stress management and relaxation techniques**, such as mindfulness and meditation
- **Complementary therapies** like massage, reflexology and acupuncture
- **Specialist services** such as prosthesis or wig fitting and manual lymph drainage
- **Mind and body sessions**, for example, yoga and tai chi
- **Expressive therapies** such as creative writing and art
- **Free Irish Cancer Society publications** and other high-quality, trustworthy information on a range of topics

Cancer support services usually have a drop-in service where you can call in for a cup of tea and find out what’s available.

You can call our Cancer Nurseline on Freephone 1800 200 700 to find your nearest cancer support centre. Or see our online directory at [http://www.cancer.ie/support/support-in-your-area/directory](http://www.cancer.ie/support/support-in-your-area/directory)

If you would like more information on any of our services, call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700 or visit a Daffodil Centre.
Questions to ask your doctor

Here is a list of questions people often want to ask. There is also some space for you to write down your own questions if you wish. Do ask questions – it is always better to ask than to worry.

- How am I likely to feel throughout my illness?
- What can I do to cope?
- Is there someone I can talk to about my fears and concerns?
- What are my chances of getting anxiety or depression?
- How can I deal with depression if it occurs?
- How can I cope with the changes in my body as a result of cancer?
- Are there any support groups available?
- Is there anyone that I can speak to about my spiritual or religious needs?
- Can someone help me talk to other members of my family about what is happening to me?
- What support is available for other people in my family, such as my partner, carer or children?
Join the Irish Cancer Society team

If you want to make a difference to people affected by cancer, join our team!

Support people affected by cancer
Reaching out directly to people with cancer is one of the most rewarding ways to help:
- Help people needing lifts to hospital by becoming a volunteer driver
- Give one-on-one support to someone newly diagnosed with cancer as part of our Survivor Support programme
- Give information and support to people concerned about or affected by cancer at one of our hospital-based Daffodil Centres

Share your experiences
Use your voice to bring reassurance to cancer patients and their families, help people to connect with our services or inspire them to get involved as a volunteer:
- Share your cancer story
- Tell people about our services
- Describe what it’s like to organise or take part in a fundraising event

Raise money
All our services are funded by the public’s generosity:
- Donate direct
- Take part in one of our fundraising events or challenges
- Organise your own event

Contact our Cancer Nurseline on Freephone 1800 200 700 if you want to get involved!

Did you like this booklet?
We would love to hear your comments and suggestions.
Please email reviewers@irishcancer.ie

More information and support
If you would like more information or someone to talk to, now or at any time in the future, please call our Cancer Nurseline on 1800 200 700.