

## Telling Other People about Your Diagnosis



**This Information Sheet offers suggestions about telling friends, family/whānau about your diagnosis.**

**Find a quiet time and a quiet place** where you will not be interrupted. Turn off the TV and phone.

**Signal that you're introducing an important subject.** Try saying something like: "I think it would be best if I tell you what's going on. Is that okay?"

**If you think your friend knows** some of what has been happening, then it can be quite useful to start by asking what he or she knows before you go over ground that has already been covered, for example "You probably know some of this already, so why don't you tell me what you make of the situation so far, and then I'll take it from there".

**Give the information in small chunks,** a few sentences at a time, and ask your friend if he or she understands what you're saying before you continue. You can say any of several little phrases for that purpose, such as "Do you see what I mean?", "Do you follow me?" or "Is this making sense?"

**There will often be silences,** but don't be put off by them. You or your friend may well find that just holding hands or sitting together in the same room seems to say more than any words. If you find that a silence makes you feel uncomfortable, the easiest way to break it is with a simple question, such as "What are you thinking about?"

**When you tell someone close to you** that something serious is wrong with you, he or she may feel very low and depressed in sympathy with your situation. You may, therefore, feel that you ought to try to be positive and upbeat in order to relieve your friend's feelings. If the facts of your situation support that, by all means, do so. But if there is a great deal of uncertainty or worry about the future, you shouldn't feel that you need to hide the facts from your friend in order not to hurt her or his feelings. Try to communicate the real situation as accurately as you can.

It may be painful for your friend at this particular moment, but if you paint an overly rosy picture that proves to be false, your friend will be much more disappointed (or even hurt) later on. By following these suggestions you can leave your friend much better equipped to give you support in the future.

**Respond to other people's reactions.** Even if you are the person with cancer, you may have more difficulty dealing with your friend's emotions than your own. This is because when people are unable to cope with their own emotions, they tend to avoid the situation altogether. So your friend might stay away from you rather than face the fact that he or she has strong emotions but doesn't know how to deal with them. Here are some suggestions for helping both of you.

**Always try to acknowledge your friend's feelings.** You might say something like, "You look as if you're feeling really uneasy when I talk about the cancer," or "I guess coming here makes you very upset." In an ideal world, of course, this wouldn't be necessary. Your friend would be able to explain what he or she was feeling and then bring the focus to you and what you want to talk about. But this isn't an ideal world, so you may have to do some of the groundwork to get the support you need.

**Don't be afraid to acknowledge how you feel at the same time,** for example, "This is making both of us feel awful," or "I know you're worried about what's going to happen next, and so am I." The more you are aware of your own feelings and the other person's, the better the conversation will be.

**If the other person is your spouse or sexual partner,** don't ignore the subject of sex. If you had an active sex life until the illness, it will almost certainly be affected by the diagnosis. There are many elements that come into play: fear of the illness and of the treatment, resentment about the illness, change of physical appearance, embarrassment and so on. All of these tend to make both partners withdraw from each other physically and feel shy and awkward. Quite often, sex may stop completely, often at a time when you most need to be reassured and cuddled.

Try to explain your needs and wants, and discuss what can be done by either or both of you. Of course, it's embarrassing to talk about these things, but a very small amount of conversation makes a great deal of difference, whereas, ignoring the subject and (literally) turning your back on it will cause serious resentment and mistrust on both sides.

## You and your family

As someone diagnosed with cancer, you know that such a diagnosis is both a shock and a challenge for you. Support from family and friends can be a great help to you coping with cancer. You may feel isolated and lonely. Connections with other people who care about you and try to understand your situation can help you to overcome this isolation.

Health professionals support this process by encouraging families to learn about cancer and how to help their family member. Family support has a positive impact on an individual with cancer.

Family support works both ways. Many times, people with cancer are unaware that they have a positive effect on their family members. Families say they get strength from watching their family members cope with their cancer.

After a diagnosis of cancer, the structure of the family can be greatly changed. Communication patterns can be disrupted. People may be afraid to say things to each other in the same way as they did before. The roles in the family can be affected, such as when family members are unable to work or take responsibility for things they did before or since their diagnosis of cancer.

Family counselling can provide education and support to help you work together to support each other.

## Some suggestions for helping families and people with cancer

**Know your limits.** No one can do everything. If you expect to do everything, you will become frustrated, disappointed and exhausted. Knowing your limits helps you put your energies to things that are of most importance.

**Communicate.** Each family communicates in their own way. How you talk to each other is not as important as how often you talk. Clamming up and feeling as though you are walking on eggshells or avoiding communication will not help you or your family cope with cancer. When you do communicate with your family members be honest and specific about what concerns you. Remember, though, that communication is not always expressed in words.

Your actions can communicate your feelings as well or often better than the words you speak. Sometimes keeping company with a person can be a form of communication and support.

**Knowledge is power.** The more you know and understand about something stressful, the stronger you will be handling it. Seek out books and other information about cancer. Ask professionals working with you for resources. There is always something new to learn. No question is too foolish to ask if it is important to you.

## Sources of support

It's easy to become overwhelmed by your cancer. Seeking support and information can help. Here are some suggestions:

- talk with family and friends
- contact the Cancer Information Helpline on **0800 CANCER (226 237)**
- seek peer support through Cancer Connect (available through the Cancer Society of New Zealand.)
- visit your local Cancer Society library
- talk to health professionals working with you
- joining Support Groups
- talk with counsellors.

*(Source: CancerCare Briefs)*