

**Patient  
Information**

# Coping with cancer and low mood

## Introduction

This leaflet has been developed by the Trust's psychologists who work with and offer support to cancer patients and their families. It is based on current evidence for managing low mood and is intended to provide you with some introductory information.

## Coping with cancer and low mood

A diagnosis of cancer, having cancer treatment or adjusting to life after treatment can be distressing, disruptive or confusing for both people with cancer and their families. It may feel like a struggle to cope. Some people can experience a range of unwelcome feelings such as low mood and sadness. Many people can experience feelings of loss and failure, guilt, irritability or frustration. It is not unusual for these feelings to come and go, but sometimes they may be present a lot of the time and affect day-to-day life and relationships.

## Things that may help

- **Take regular gentle exercise**  
This is an excellent way of relieving tension and boosting your mood, as well as helping you to cope with fatigue. Do not push yourself to do activities you find painful or too physically demanding. A gentle walk in the park, walking to your local shops, or going outside for fresh air can help.
- **Do things that give you pleasure or a sense of achievement**  
It can be helpful to spend some time thinking about which of your daily activities gives you a sense of pleasure and achievement. Make a list of them to help you remember. Are there any new activities you would like to do that are achievable at the moment?

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- **Treats and rewards**  
Treats and rewards may motivate you to do things and may compensate for the difficulties and challenges you have experienced. What kinds of treats or rewards have 'picked you up' in the past? Would these help you at the moment? Can you say 'well done' to yourself for the effort it has taken to go for an appointment, receive treatment or cope with cancer in general?
- **'I don't feel like doing anything'**  
Reduced motivation is sometimes a problem when you are feeling low in mood. It can be hard to do things but then you may miss out on the things that would previously have given you pleasure. This can be helped by choosing small goals that you know you can succeed in completing. Succeeding in these small, enjoyable tasks should help to motivate you to do more.
- **Try to eat a healthy balanced diet**  
A healthy diet can help you feel better but treatment may make this more difficult. Ask to be referred to a dietician if you are concerned about your diet.
- **Try to keep a regular sleeping pattern**  
Before going to bed, avoid caffeinated drinks such as coffee, tea or coke. If you cannot sleep do not stay in bed and worry, get up and do some light activities and go back to bed when you feel tired. If you do not sleep well one night, try not to take daytime naps, as this may make you less tired at night. Make sure that you rest when you are feeling unwell and ask your doctor if you are worried about your symptoms or treatment.

## Ways of thinking

- **Guilt and self-blame**  
There may be times when you feel guilty because you have to rely on others for help. You might also blame yourself for your health problems or feel that it could be caused by past experiences or behaviour. These thoughts may make you feel low in mood or believe you are being punished.

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Listen out for these thoughts. Are you being too hard on yourself?

Research into low mood and depression tells us that it can be helpful to challenge this thinking with evidence that no one is guilty or to blame – because you are **not**.

- **Feeling a failure**

Coping with cancer and receiving treatment can take a great deal of time and may stop you from achieving the roles you rely on to make you feel successful. This may make you feel like you have not managed to do the things you would have wanted to do.

It can be helpful to try and focus on parts of a role you are still managing to do, or on the parts that can be changed to let you continue doing. An example of this is doing small amounts of paperwork or helping other family members to write your shopping lists if or when you are too unwell to go out.

- **Feeling a burden/protecting others**

Sometimes you may feel unwilling to share your concerns with people close to you because you do not want to be a burden or upset them. You might try to protect people from difficult feelings but this may create a 'gap' in the relationship, which then may make you feel unsupported.

- **Living with uncertainty**

Cancer and treatment can be a time of huge uncertainty for you and it can be difficult to plan too far ahead. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness. However, people do find it helpful to think about the things in their lives that they can still be hopeful about and enjoy, in addition to coping with the illness.

- **Be kind to yourself**

Do not tell yourself off if you are struggling to cope. Being diagnosed with cancer and receiving treatment can be a very overwhelming experience for many people. Say, 'well done' because of the hard work you are doing as you cope with the illness and treatment.

"I feel different on a daily basis. If I set long-term goals for myself they may be unattainable and I set myself up to be disappointed. So I set mini goals."

## Coping with feelings

- **Irritability and frustration**

You may feel irritable and frustrated when you sense control has been taken away from you. This is quite common when coping with unwanted symptoms, treatment and regular hospital appointments. Try not to blame those around you – they are trying to cope too. Are there things that you are still in control of that you can focus on? Is there someone to share your frustrations with who may help you to think of new or different solutions? This could be your key worker, doctor, a family member or friend.

- **Share your feelings with someone**

It can be important to keep aspects of your social life going and keep in contact with friends. You may find that some friends find it harder to talk to you because of their fears about cancer. Try not to blame them - but focus on friends and family who can offer you support at the moment. It can be helpful to share the feelings of frustration that may arise from your cancer experience with someone supportive in your life.

- **Changes to your body and intimacy issues**

People have to cope with changes to their bodies after cancer and cancer treatment. Sometimes this can affect how you feel about yourself or your intimate/sexual relationships. It can help to talk to your partner or a trusted healthcare professional.

'Try to find someone you are at ease with to talk about your inner feelings. It is not always easy but it is well worth doing.'

## Dealing with depression

Sometimes low mood may become worse or continue for several weeks at a time. This may lead you to feel hopeless or to find little pleasure in anything. This may be a sign of depression. Depression is not a sign of personal failure and is usually treated successfully when diagnosed. An important step to feeling better is getting the appropriate help.

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If you are worried that you may be depressed you should discuss this with your key worker, oncologist, specialist nurse, GP or another doctor. They may consider whether you would benefit from a referral to a psychological service, or you are welcome to contact us yourself.

### Contact information

If you have any questions or you would like further information, please contact the Health Psychology Department to speak to a psychologist.

#### Health Psychology Department

Tel: 03004 228 523

Psychologists working with the Palliative Care Teams can also be contacted as follows:

Gloucestershire Royal Hospital

Tel: 03004 225 179

Cheltenham General Hospital

Tel: 03004 223 447

Psychologists working with the Haematology Team can also be contacted via the Health Psychology Department.

### Further information

Other useful information on coping emotionally can be found via the following:

#### FOCUS Support and Information Centre

Tel: Ali on 0300 422 4414 or Mandy on 0300 422 3226

Drop-in times: Monday to Friday 8:30am to 4:30pm

Website: [www.gloshospitals.nhs.uk/our-services/services-we-offer/cancer/focus/](http://www.gloshospitals.nhs.uk/our-services/services-we-offer/cancer/focus/)

#### Cancer Research UK

Tel: 0800 800 4040 Monday to Friday 9:00am to 5:00pm

Website: [www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/coping-with-cancer/coping-emotionally/](http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/coping-with-cancer/coping-emotionally/)

#### Samaritans

Website: [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

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**Maggie's Centre Cheltenham**

Website: [www.maggiescentres.org](http://www.maggiescentres.org)

Tel: 01242 250611

**Macmillan** Tel: 0800 808 8000

Monday to Friday 9:00am to 8:00pm

Website: [www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk)

**Macmillan Information Hub – the Atrium Gloucestershire  
Royal Hospital**

Tel: 0300 422 8880

Monday to Friday, 9.00 am to 4.00 pm

Email: [ghn-tr.macmillanhub@nhs.net](mailto:ghn-tr.macmillanhub@nhs.net)

This service offers support and information to anyone who has concerns about cancer, their relatives, friends and carers, including benefits support, health promotion and local support groups.

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