



PATIENT INFORMATION

Moving on from Cancer Patient to Survivor:

Some simple tips.

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South Devon Healthcare Foundation Trust Cancer Services would like to recognise the work of Lorna Higgins and Sue Kernaghan in the adaptation of this booklet from their original booklet endorsed by the Merseyside and Cheshire Cancer Network 2007.

Introduction

The end of your cancer treatment is over but you may still feel mentally and physically unprepared to join the 'normal' world. This may lead you to experience increased anxiety, stress and low mood. ***This booklet aims to outline some coping techniques that can help you to get back on to the right path.***

There are links between how you feel physically and how you feel mentally and vice versa. For instance, if you are feeling unwell, you may find yourself short-tempered or more easily upset than you would normally. Similarly, if you are very worried about something you may find that you are more prone to headaches or muscular tension than you would normally. Therefore, at times when you are feeling physically 'under the weather', it is important not to neglect our emotional or mental well being, and to ensure that we do things to help us feel emotionally better.

At times of illness it is easy to forget about looking after our mental well being although, in many ways, this is one of the times we need to think about it the most. This booklet will look at simple ways that we can use to help enhance our physical and mental well being.

Research suggests that as many as three-quarters of people with cancer experience anxiety as a result of a cancer diagnosis and nearly half experience low mood or depression. This is an extremely natural reaction to have in times of increased stress, and these feelings are likely to lessen and go away completely with time, but there are many ways that the symptoms that you are experiencing can be helped.

"I found after treatment a really scary time. I wasn't mentally or physically fit enough to return to the real world. This booklet would have been really useful to have at this time."
- Sue, a 4-year Survivor.

"After treatment everyone thought I was better but I wasn't and felt really low mentally. I could not get any help and the GP suggested that I go on anti-depressants. I didn't want to take them and a self help guide such as this would have been really helpful to follow."
Mike a 3 year survivor

Cancer Specific Concerns

Following the end of treatment it is extremely common for people to become worried about the possibility of their cancer recurring. Although some level of concern is completely natural too much worry can affect your quality of life. If you find that worries of recurrence are affecting your quality of life, you may find it beneficial to talk through your concerns with a healthcare professional or with your friends and family. Support groups can also be useful to share your worries or experiences.

If you have any specific concerns relating to your treatment or recovery you are advised to contact your Clinical Nurse Specialist, GP or consultant for further advice.

Stress and Anxiety

Stress is a term used to describe how our body reacts when we are under more pressure than we feel we are able to cope with. Although we need some stress in order to perform at our best, too much stress can be detrimental and cause us to perform at low level. It can also cause other physical effects such as headaches, muscle tension and fatigue.

Anxiety is how our body responds when we are in a dangerous or stressful situation.

When we feel that we are in a stressful or dangerous situation our bodies release a hormone called adrenaline. This causes a number of physical reactions in the body. For example, it causes our heart rate to increase; blood is diverted to the muscles from areas such as the stomach which causes 'butterfly' sensations and also makes the muscles feel tingly or shaky and our breathing rate increases. This is known as the 'Flight or Fight' reaction as it prepares our bodies to fight the 'danger', or to run away from it. Although this was extremely useful when humans were evolving, or if we are in physical danger, for example in danger of getting run over by a car, it is not as useful in many situations that cause us anxiety in the modern world however our bodies still react in the same way and causes the same bodily sensations.

There are a number of techniques that can be used to help counter these effects. We will go through these in more detail later in the booklet.

Low Mood

Low mood is another common emotional effect of increased stress. This can cause us to feel tired, lack concentration and motivation, find it difficult to get to sleep or wake up during the night and have little or no pleasure in doing things that we used to enjoy.

Again, however, there are a number of techniques that can help alleviate these effects which we will look at in more detail.

Section 1 – What do you want to achieve?

When treatment is finished, many people feel they have mixed feelings about the future. Things such as going back to work can seem to be very daunting. This booklet aims to help you improve how you are feeling emotionally so that you feel more able to cope with these daunting thoughts. It also aims to provide you with help and advice about how you might be able to take small steps towards achieving your ultimate goal.

Activity Planning

When we are feeling down, we often stop doing or do less of the things that we used to enjoy. This in turn stops us feeling better as we no longer get the pleasure that we used to get from doing that activity. This can make us feel lower. Planning time to carry out pleasurable activity can help to boost our mood. It is important not to be too ambitious to begin with, and to start building up activities gradually. When we are feeling low mentally or physically we may not be able to carry out activities to the extent that we used to be able to straight away.

A good place to start is to do something nice for yourself once a day for a week, or a period of time that is comfortable for you. It doesn't have to be anything energetic or expensive, it could be as simple as relaxing in a bath, buying yourself some flowers or a favourite magazine, watching your favourite TV programme or film or going for a walk. Make sure it is something that makes you feel special.



The next step is then to plan into your week time to carry out an activity that you find pleasurable. It can be anything, going for a walk, reading a book, phoning or meeting a friend, anything that you enjoy, feel comfortable doing and feel able to achieve.

Section 2 – Achieving your Goal

Lifestyle

What our lifestyle is like can affect how we feel ourselves. By making small changes to an aspect of our lifestyle, we can improve how we feel.

How to Relax

Being able to relax is an effective way of combating the effects of stress. Although there are many different ways that people find effective in helping them to relax, there are some specific techniques that can be beneficial.

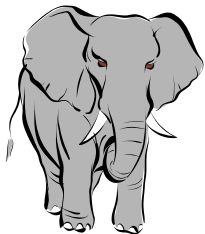


Relaxation is a skill, therefore the more it is practised the easier it becomes. If you find it difficult to begin with, don't worry. It should become easier the more you practice.

Breathing Techniques

Breathing techniques can help to reduce anxiety and make us feel more relaxed.

When we are feeling anxious or tense we tend to make smaller, more frequent shallow breaths. By focusing on our breathing and consciously taking longer breaths, we can help to prevent the other symptoms of anxiety and help ourselves to relax.



Elephant Breathing

This is a straight forward technique where we concentrate on breathing in through your nose, counting in your mind, 1 elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant and then breathing out through your mouth for a count of 1 elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant. If you find it difficult to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth don't worry about it, just do whatever is most comfortable for you. The word 'Elephant' is used as saying it to yourself takes about 1 second. This helps to pace your breathing and will make sure that you don't breathe too fast.

If you find yourself in a situation where you are feeling panicky you can also use this technique to calm yourself. By cupping your hands over your mouth and carrying out 'elephant breathing' it can help to calm yourself down more quickly.

Breathing techniques are most effective if carried out for 3 minutes, as this gives your body the chance for it to take effect. For it to be most effective it should be practiced 3 times a day for about 3 weeks to help reduce your overall levels of stress and tension.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

This is an effective technique that helps to reduce tension in your muscles.

- ❖ Firstly, find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed.
- ❖ Sit quietly for a few minutes, with your eyes closed, practice the breathing techniques as above. If you find that lots of distracting thoughts come into your head while you are trying to relax you can use a visualisation technique (see below) to stop them.
- ❖ When you are ready and feel comfortable, go through your muscles in turn clenching them for about 10 seconds and then releasing them and letting them relax. Start with your hands, and then proceed to your arms, shoulders, facial muscles, upper back, lower back thighs, calves and feet.
- ❖ Think about the differences in the way your muscles feel when they are tensed and when they are relaxed.
- ❖ When you have finished sit quietly for a few minutes, concentrating on your breathing techniques, until you feel comfortable.

You might find this technique difficult to carry out on your own to begin with. It might be helpful to get a friend to help read the instructions to you for the first few times you try, or many libraries have relaxation tapes or CDs that you can borrow to help you get used to the technique. If you find that there are particular times of the day when you feel anxious or tense, for example when you are going to bed, carrying out this technique can help to reduce your anxiety levels at these times.

When you have practised this technique a few times you may be able to recognise particular muscles in your body that are feeling particularly tense. Tensing and then relaxing that particular muscle, or group of muscles, can help to reduce the tension in them and help you to feel more relaxed.



Visualisation

Imagining yourself in a place, for example a beach or a forest, that you find peaceful and calming, can also be an effective way of helping you to relax. Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed and sit quietly. Imagine yourself in this place. Imagine what you can see, what the weather is like, how it smells and what you can hear, etc. This is often a good technique to carry out after the progressive muscle relaxation, described above, to help you relax completely.

If you find it difficult to stop thoughts coming into your head when you are relaxing, many people find it helpful to visualise all of these thoughts being put into a chest. Then visualise yourself locking the chest and putting the key away so that the thoughts cannot get out as they are locked away inside the chest.



Complementary Therapies

Please note you are advised to contact your GP or specialist before commencing any type of complementary therapy or exercise programme as these may not be suitable for some people with specific health conditions.

Aromatherapy

This involves the use of selected oils and can be used during massage, in a burner or in baths. It is particularly effective in helping to manage feelings of anxiety. As some of these oils have physical effects on the body, for example raising blood pressure, it is important to check with your GP or specialist before using oils whilst you are receiving cancer treatments.

Reiki

This involves lying on a couch and relaxing. The practitioner then places their hands non-obtrusively in a sequence of positions over the whole body. This treats the whole person rather than specific symptoms and many people find that this helps to reduce tension and is an effective way of relaxing.

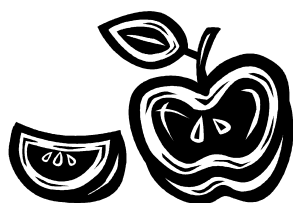
Reflexology

This is a specialist form of foot or hand massage. This works on the theory that different areas of the sole of your foot are connected to different areas of the body or internal organs. The therapist will put pressure on specific points of your hand or foot to stimulate the area of the body connected to it. Many people find that this therapy can help to reduce tension and pain as well as reducing symptoms such as constipation and sickness.

Indian Head Massage

This is a type of therapy that involves massaging the head. It is said to have many benefits with people finding that it helps to reduce headaches and stress as well as helping with scalp and hair problems and relieving eye strain and muscle tension.

Eating a healthy diet is a good way of improving your overall health. Health professionals recommend that a healthy diet should consist of:



Diet

- ❖ Plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables
- ❖ Food high in fibre, for example wholemeal bread and grain
- ❖ Low in fat
- ❖ Balanced portion of protein.

You may have seen a dietician pre or during your treatment who has given you advice on your diet and this may differ from what has been described.

It is important however that you eat a diet that you enjoy.



Spiritual Support

When we talk about spirituality we usually mean that which gives meaning and aspiration to our lives. This may or may not include faith or a search for God. It is very much tied up with a person's identity, existence and capacity for love, relationships, creativity, altruism, self-sacrifice, faith and belief

Spiritual issues may have already come into focus for you during your illness and as you seek to move on you may still have questions that you would like to raise.

Spiritual practices also help people in coping and re-directing their lives following illness.

You may consider:-

- ❖ Finding a special place where you are able to reflect, pray or meditate
- ❖ Keeping a journal
- ❖ Reading sacred writings
- ❖ Finding a person that you are able to explore your questions with. This may be a specific faith leader or someone that you trust who will listen to you.
- ❖ Attending a place of worship

Physical Activity

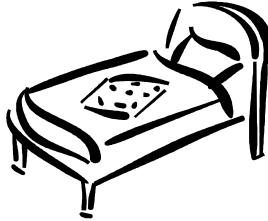
Undertaking physical activity has been shown to help lift peoples mood. It releases a chemical into your brains called endorphins which help to improve overall mood. Carrying out some sort of physical activity on a regular basis can therefore be effective in helping to keep us emotionally well. It is important to build up physical activities slowly and not to be too ambitious at first. The activity you choose to try does not have to be particularly energetic, a short walk is a good place to start and can be punctuated with short breaks if you feel you need to sit down or rest. It is important to take things slowly and not overdo things to begin with. Start off where you feel comfortable and gradually increase the amount you do.

Sleep

When we are feeling emotionally low, sleep is often an area that is affected. People often either find it difficult to get to sleep that they wake up during the night or very early in the morning. Although this often improves as your mood starts to lift, there are a few tips than can help you to get a good nights sleep.

- ❖ Do not drink caffeinated drinks, such as coffee, tea, hot chocolate after 6pm.
- ❖ Do not watch T.V, read etc in bed. Only use your bedroom for sleeping and making love in.

- ❖ If you have not fallen asleep after approximately 15-20 mins get up and do something quietly e.g. listen to calming music, read a book. Until you feel sleepy and then go back to bed. If you do not sleep within approximately 15-20 mins get up and repeat the above until you fall asleep.
- ❖ Keep a notepad and pen beside your bed so that if you wake in the middle of the night and you remember something that you have to do write it down.
- ❖ Try practising the relaxation technique described earlier either before you go to bed or when you are in bed to help you relax as you are going to sleep.
- ❖ Don't exercise in the evenings as this can have the effect of waking you up.
- ❖ Have a warm bath and a hot milky drink before going to bed.



Thinking for Confidence

At times when we are feeling vulnerable, it is easy to start losing confidence in ourselves. However, there are ways that can help us to build our confidence back up.

Improving Confidence

- ❖ Think about the behaviour of people who appear confident. Try to appear confident and walk tall, smile and look people in the eye. Even if you feel anxious inside, appearing confident can often make you start to make you feel so.
- ❖ Where an outfit or clothing that makes you feel good about yourself.
- ❖ Be adventurous and try something you've always wanted to try but haven't had the opportunity. Think about how you felt before and after.

Improving Self-Esteem

Self-esteem can be affected when we are feeling vulnerable. Self-esteem is a term used to describe how we feel about ourselves and the value we attach to ourselves as people.

Negative thoughts and beliefs about ourselves can lead to low self-esteem which can affect the way we feel and behave in everyday life.

- ❖ Reward yourself when you have achieved or succeeded at something
- ❖ Make a list of **at least** 10 things that you are good at or have done well at, for instance 'I am a good cook', 'I'm a good listener'. If you can think of more than 10 then continue.
- ❖ Often we expect more of ourselves than we would of other people and this can result in judging ourselves to harshly. Ask yourself 'Am I judging myself more harshly than I would someone else?'

Goal Setting

We all need goals to work towards. Without them our lives can lose meaning. Achieving these goals can help to boost our confidence. It is important that we set ourselves goals that are achievable and not too overwhelming. It is often useful to write these goals down to make it concrete and more of a commitment.

The next step is plan how you are going to achieve your goal.

It is often helpful to break it down into 5 or 6 steps that will help you achieve your goal and make the final goal seem easier to achieve.

In achieving most goals there are obstacles that will have to be overcome. Thinking about what these obstacles might be or identifying any problems that you might have in achieving your goal, or one of the steps towards your goal, can help to prepare you in case these problems arise.

Build in rewards, so that when you have achieved your main goal, or one of the steps towards it, you can reward yourself for your achievement.

How to be more Assertive

Being assertive is being able to communicate our thoughts, opinions and beliefs with others in an open and honest manner. This allows us to express a range of emotions with others without feeling self-conscious. Few people are able to be assertive in all aspects of their lives which can lead to a loss of self-esteem if we find difficulty in being assertive in the long term.

It is important to point out that being assertive is not being selfish or rude. Everyone has the right to express their own feelings and opinions. The goal to being assertive is to express your own feelings and opinions without violating those of others.

We can help to improve our ability to be assertive by identifying specific situations where you think you need to be more assertive. It is then often useful to prepare, rehearse or role play situations that you may find yourself in where you can practice being assertive. Once you are confident doing that you can transfer your new skills to the situation itself. You may then find that, as you become more assertive, your confidence will increase and this will then increase how assertive you are.

Body Image

As a result of your illness or treatment you may have experienced a change in your body, or the way you think or feel about your body. Although everybody reacts to changes to their body in different ways there are some suggestions that may help you:

- ❖ Talk to other survivors about their experiences.
- ❖ Gain confidence in your appearance – wear clothes that make you feel good about yourself.
- ❖ Eat a healthy balanced diet and exercise regularly to improve how you feel.

Where Else Can I Get Help?

The Lodge Cancer Support and Information Centre



Torbay Hospital Annexe, Newton Road, Torquay TQ2 7BA.

Tel: 01803 617521

(Answer phone evenings & weekends)

Please check for opening times

The lodge offers a wide range of support for cancer patients and carers.

- Benefits advice
- Nutritional Workshops
- Wig fitting service
- Moving on Groups
- Buddy support
- Pamper sessions
- Complementary Therapies
- Relaxation Groups

Find out more by contacting them on the above number.

Websites

www.macmillan.org.uk

www.cancerhelp.org.uk