

Talking with someone who has cancer



About this booklet

This booklet is about talking with someone who has cancer. It is for anyone who wants to support someone with cancer, including carers, family members and friends.

The booklet explains how to support someone who has cancer. We hope it helps you deal with some of the questions or feelings you may have.

This booklet does not have information for people who have been diagnosed with cancer.

The following booklets could also be helpful:

- [Talking about cancer](#) – this is for people who have cancer.
- [Talking to children and teenagers when an adult has cancer](#).

We have more information about ordering these booklets on [page 58](#).

How to use this booklet

This booklet is split into sections to help you find what you need. You do not have to read it from start to finish. You can use the [contents list](#) to help you.

It is fine to skip parts of the booklet. You can always come back to them when you feel ready.

On [pages 64 to 76](#), there are details of other organisations that can help.

Quotes

In this booklet, we have included quotes from people who have had cancer which you may find helpful. These are from people who have chosen to share their story with us. To share your experience, visit macmillan.org.uk/shareyourstory

For more information

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm, or visit macmillan.org.uk

If you would prefer to speak to us in another language, interpreters are available. Please tell us, in English, the language you want to use.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call us using Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the Relay UK app.

We have some information in different languages and formats, including audio, easy read, Braille, large print, interactive PDF and translations. To order these, visit macmillan.org.uk/otherformats or call **0808 808 00 00**.

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The benefits of talking

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Why talking is important

When someone close to you has cancer, talking to them about it might feel upsetting or uncomfortable. It might take some time for both of you to cope with the news. There is no right or wrong way to cope.

But talking can help. It can release stress and help you and the person with cancer feel better. Being able to talk about what is happening and your feelings can help to make sense of them.

Talking can help you and the person with cancer get the support you need. Being listened to and heard can help you both feel that you are not alone.

Good support can help someone cope better with any changes that cancer can bring. Having someone to talk to can help with feelings of anxiety or depression. Support from family or friends can make a real difference.

You may worry about what to say or worry you will say the wrong thing. Often the most important things are just listening to the person and keeping in touch. Remember, they are the same person they have always been. You might be worried about upsetting them. But talking about fear or distress does not generally make it worse. Often, talking can help.

Talking to children and teenagers about cancer

Children and teenagers might need extra support to talk about cancer, especially if the person with cancer is someone their age.

It can help them to know about cancer and its effects. But do not feel you need to talk about it in too much detail. Listen to them when they want to talk about it and let them know that you are there to answer any questions.

Remind them that the person with cancer is still the same person they were before. Encourage them to keep in touch. If the person with cancer is a friend of theirs, talk to them about things that they can do to help their friend.

[Young Lives vs Cancer](#) has some helpful tools to help you support your child with talking about cancer. We have more information in our booklet [Talking to children and teenagers when an adult has cancer](#).

You can order our booklets and leaflets for free.
Visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.





Listening

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Be a good listener

Most of us feel helpless when hearing the news that someone close to you has cancer. But you can often help just by listening to them and letting them talk. Sometimes what the person needs most is to be listened to.

Listening carefully is a skill that you can learn. It helps you be more supportive and to better understand what your relative or friend needs. You can listen without feeling you need to have answers.

“ A lot of the time people just want to talk. They just want a listening ear rather than practical advice – especially if they've just been recently diagnosed. ”

Calum, diagnosed with bowel cancer

Find out if the person wants to talk

You do not always have to talk about the cancer. You could just listen and let the person with cancer talk when they are ready. Let them know that if they want to talk about the cancer, you are willing to listen.

Your relative or friend may just want to talk about normal things, such as TV programmes, sports events or what has been happening in your life. There is something very reassuring about everyday conversations. This can help them to feel that cancer has not taken over every part of their life.

Let them decide when to talk

You may be able to sense if your relative or friend wants to talk. Listen to them carefully. If they tell you something about the cancer, ask them if they want to talk about it more. But let them decide if and when they want to have that conversation. If you are not sure, you can always ask, 'Do you feel like talking?'

If your relative or friend does want to talk to you about cancer, you may find it helpful to find out:

- what topics are okay to talk about
- how they will let you know if they do not want to talk
- what support you can offer that would be helpful.

Sometimes people do not want to talk about cancer or their feelings. This may be because they do not feel it will be helpful for them or that they want a break from thinking about it. You can still help by listening and paying attention when they do choose to talk.

“You don’t want to be the person who always talks about cancer. I’m lucky that a good friend is a nurse and we would have conversations about treatment and things. But, I still want to have conversations about the kids, and last night’s TV. ”

Julie, diagnosed with squamous cell carcinoma

How to listen

When your relative or friend is talking, it is important to give them your full attention. Here are some simple tips.

Find a good place to talk

It is usually best to talk somewhere comfortable and private. Here are some things you can do to help:

- Switch off your mobile phone and other distractions, like the TV.
- Let them know you have time to sit and talk with them.
- Sit down next to the person or at an angle to each other, rather than face on. This can help make the setting feel less intense.
- Sit close, but not too close. Sitting about 2 to 3 feet (60 to 90cm) away makes it easier to talk intimately and gives them personal space.
- Sit quietly. This will give the impression of calmness, even though you may not feel relaxed.

Show you are listening

Try to look at the person as you are listening. This shows that they have your full attention. It is also good to nod occasionally. You can try to encourage the person to talk by making comments such as 'Hmmm', 'Uh-huh' or 'Yes'.

Check you have understood

Asking questions and giving feedback will help you check you have understood what they have said. It also shows that you are listening and trying to understand.

Questions you could ask include:

- 'Do you mean that...?'
- 'What did that feel like?'
- 'How do you feel now?'

It is also good to check what you have heard is right:

- 'What I'm hearing is...'
- 'It sounds like you're saying...'

Keep an open mind

Try not to talk while the other person is talking. Wait for them to stop speaking before you start. Try not to think about what you are going to say next. Listening is not the same as waiting to talk.

If your relative or friend tells you about their fears or worries, it is important to let them be sad or upset. It may be hard for you to hear some of the things they say. But it can really help them if you are able to listen while they talk.

We have more information on coping with difficult emotions such as sadness and anger on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/emotions](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/emotions)

Be open and honest

It is good to be open and honest about your feelings. Here are some things to think about:

- Make time for your feelings, and your relative or friend's feelings.
- Give your opinion respectfully, but be aware your relative or friend may feel differently.
- Treat the other person the way you would want to be treated.

Breaks in the conversation

If someone stops talking, it might mean they are thinking about something painful or sensitive. Wait for a little while and then ask them if they want to talk about it. Do not rush. It is okay to wait until they feel ready to talk again.

Sometimes just being there and touching their hand or putting an arm around their shoulder can help. If they pull their hand away or look uncomfortable, you will know to give them space. But a touch may be just what is needed to help them talk. It shows that you care and want to support them.

Using humour

If your relative or friend wants to use humour to help them cope, it is good to respond to this. But do not be the one to introduce humour into the conversation in case they do not find this helpful.

Main points to remember

- Check you understand what the person is saying – if you are unsure what they mean just ask.
- Each person's experience of cancer is different. Everyone copes in different ways and the ways they cope may change.
- Do not judge or offer advice that has not been asked for. If you want to offer advice, think first if it will be helpful.
- Use humour only if the person uses it.
- Show you are listening by nodding and making eye contact.
- Allow the person to be sad or upset. Acknowledge how difficult their situation must be.
- Make sure you look after yourself as well as the person with cancer. You may need support too.



What to avoid saying

Lots of people worry about saying the wrong thing. Understanding what may be unhelpful might make you feel more confident about talking with your relative or friend.

Below are some examples of things people with cancer tell us they do not find helpful. We have also suggested other things that you can say.

If you have said any of these things, do not be hard on yourself. No one gets it right all the time. The most important thing is that you are trying to help. Do not stop offering support because you are worried about making a mistake. Your relative or friend will appreciate that you are trying to help.

'I know you will be fine'

It is very common for people with cancer to have fears and worries. You might want to make them feel better by telling them everything will be okay, but often this does not help.

Saying things like, 'That is a good cancer to have', or 'At least you do not need chemotherapy', is not usually helpful. The person with cancer may feel you do not understand what they are coping with.

Rather than dismissing what someone is facing, listen to your relative or friend and let them speak freely about their feelings.

'You are so strong'

People often say this because they admire how the person with cancer is coping. But it is not always helpful, as the person may feel under pressure to be brave or strong all the time. They may then feel they cannot admit to feeling down, or ask for help.

You could tell them you understand they may have good days and bad days. Ask what support you can give on bad days.

'You need to think positively'

It is not usually helpful to tell your relative or friend to think positively. No one can feel positive all the time. It is normal for people when they have cancer to feel scared, angry or upset.

There is no evidence that positive thinking can make treatments work better or stop cancer from coming back. If you suggest that being positive affects someone's cancer, they may think they were not positive enough and it is their fault if treatment does not go well.

Ask them how they are feeling and be ready to hear what they tell you, even if it is not all positive. Being able to express and accept feelings can be the start of coping with them.

'My aunt had cancer'

When your relative or friend talks about cancer, do not tell them about someone else's cancer experience unless they ask about it. Avoid sharing details you have heard or read about. Each person's experience is different.

Treat your relative or friend as an individual. Try to focus on them rather than comparing them with anyone else.

Encourage them to tell you more about the cancer and listen to what they say. They will know you are interested in hearing about their experience.

'You look really tired'

Think before commenting on how someone looks. Some people with cancer find that changes to how they look or how their body works very hard to cope with. If someone looks tired or has lost weight, they probably know this already. Being reminded does not help them to feel any better.

It is generally best not to comment if someone is not looking well. Let your relative or friend be the one to mention their appearance if they want to talk about it.

If your relative or friend looks well, and you want to tell them this, you could say something like, 'You look well, but how are you really feeling?'. This makes it clear you really want to know how they are and that you are not just assuming everything is fine.

'You should try this diet I read about online'

Think carefully before giving advice, especially about someone's treatment. You should also avoid sharing details of something from the internet unless you know it is a reliable source.

You may have your own ideas about what would help your relative or friend. But first, ask yourself if your idea will really be helpful. You may want to tell them something that you think may help them feel better. But sometimes people facing a cancer diagnosis are overwhelmed with suggestions.

If you want to give advice but are not sure about it, you could say something like, 'I wondered about this, but I do not want to suggest it if you are not interested.'

If you do make a suggestion, be ready to accept if they do not seem interested. Remember that your relative or friend may not always want your advice or help. Try not to take it personally. Their preferences may differ from yours. It could also be one way that they can stay in charge of their life, when other parts of it feel out of control.

It is up to your relative or friend to make their own decisions about their treatment. Be ready to support their decision, even if it is not the same one you think you would make.

We have more information about reliable sources of information in our booklet [Talking about cancer](#).

“ People suggest natural remedies. I’ll tell people that I know they mean well, but please don’t tell me to take alternative supplements, I’m not going to. ”

Sophia, diagnosed with breast cancer

'If you need anything, just give me a phone call'

This is a kind offer to make, but it is a bit vague. It is better to make real offers of help.

Instead, you could offer to do some shopping, or drive your relative or friend to the hospital. Making a practical offer saves your friend trying to work out what you might be able to help with. It also shows you really want to help and are not just being polite.

We have [more information on offering practical support](#).

'It is great that it is all over'

After your relative or friend's treatment has finished, they may still need support.

When cancer treatment comes to an end, you may expect your relative or friend to move on straight away or feel happy about this. But the end of treatment can often be a difficult time. People may start thinking about what they have been through. They may be worried about the cancer coming back, and miss the regular support of their cancer team. They may be still coping with treatment side effects or adjusting to body changes.

Instead, let your relative or friend know you are still available to listen when they want to talk.



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Different ways of keeping in touch

There are many ways to keep in touch and to let your relative or friend know they are important to you. These can include:

- visiting them
- sending notes, cards, texts, messages and emails
- talking to them on the phone
- talking to them on social media sites.

You can ask your relative or friend what they prefer.

During and after cancer treatment, people may have good days and bad days. There may be times when their energy levels are low. If they are having treatment or are likely to be tired, try to keep phone calls and letters short. Before you visit, you could ask if they feel well enough to see you.

Try not to be upset if your relative or friend does not feel able to see you, or has to change plans at the last minute.

Keep inviting them

Remember to keep inviting your relative or friend to take part in plans, just like you did before they had cancer. Even if they do not feel well enough to come, it is always nice to be asked. Let them decide if they can come.

Letters, notes and cards

Handwritten notes can be special for your relative or friend. You may worry about what to write. But you can keep the message simple. If it is the first time you have written to them since their diagnosis, you can mention this. Remember to let them know you care.

If you do not know what to say, you could write something like:

- 'I am not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care.'
- 'I am sorry to hear you are going through this.'
- 'How are you doing?'
- 'If you would like to talk about it, I am here.'
- 'I will keep you in my thoughts.'

If your relative or friend has internet access, you could send them an email or an electronic card (eCard).

Macmillan has a range of free eCards.
Visit ecards.macmillan.org.uk



Gifts

Look for small, practical things your relative or friend may need or enjoy. Think about what might make their day a little better or make them smile. These do not have to be expensive.

Examples of gifts include:

- magazines, DVDs, books or audiobooks
- soft bed socks or a favourite hand cream
- special foods or snacks
- a special pillow or heating pad
- a handheld fan
- photos of family members or friends.

Phone calls and messages

Talking on the phone or sending a message lets the person know you are thinking about them.

Phone calls

Phone calls are a great way to stay in touch. Here are some things to remember:

- Phone at times that suit your relative or friend.
- Remember they might be tired, so try not to talk for too long.

End the phone call by saying you will be in touch soon and make a reminder for yourself about when to call again.

You could also think about using video-chat apps like FaceTime, Zoom and Skype. These let you see and talk to each other easily. Check with the other person before you do this. They may prefer for you not to see them when they are feeling unwell.

Text messages

Many people keep in touch with text messages. They are a quick way of letting people know you are thinking of them. You could also use other messaging services, such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

When you message the person, let them know they do not need to reply straight away. You could say something like, 'I want you to know I am thinking of you, but do not feel you have to reply'. This way, you are not putting pressure on them.

Think about sending a message when you know the person is likely to be alone. For example, they might be less likely to have visitors late at night. Sending a message is a reminder that they have support.

Social media

Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are popular ways of sharing thoughts, feelings and events. You can share things with many people at one time. They can be a good way of keeping in touch, especially if the person you are supporting feels tired or unwell.

If you want to talk with your relative or friend about cancer on social media, think about using private messaging. They may not want to talk about this in public.

Visits

It is very common for people with cancer to feel lonely and isolated. Try to spend time with your relative or friend. Being able to see them and hear their voice can often help you know how they are feeling. If they want to talk about their feelings, this may be easier if you are together.

Try to call or text first to ask if they would like a visit, as they may be feeling tired or have other plans.





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Offer help

One of the most common problems when trying to help someone with cancer is knowing where to start. Here are some tips if you want to help, but do not know what to do.

It is important to first find out if your relative or friend wants your help, and what kind of help they need. Then you can offer to help. It is always good to try to make a clear offer. Rather than saying, 'Let me know if there is anything I can do' you could ask the following questions:

- 'Shall I do the shopping?'
- 'Would you like me to pick up the children from school?'
- 'Would you like me to take you to your next appointment?'

You can also say you will keep in touch to see if there are other things you can help with.

Some people find it hard to accept support, even if they need it. This means your relative or friend may say no to your offer. Try not to take this personally. They might not be ready to accept help, or they might want to remain independent. You could offer again later if they need any support.

Do not push your relative or friend into taking help from you. Some people are happy to do things on their own.

Decide what you want to do

Start by thinking about what you are good at. You probably have skills that will help support your relative or friend.

Here are some suggestions of things you could do to help:

- Cook for them. Make meals for them and anyone they live with. Taking them pre-cooked, frozen meals may be useful.
- Help around the house such as cleaning, or in the garden.
- Take children out for the day, to give the person some rest or time with their partner.
- Babysit, so their partner can visit them in hospital.
- Arrange for shopping such as bread and milk to be at home when they come out of hospital. Or leave a bunch of flowers for them to find.
- Offer to take them to hospital appointments.

Start with the small things

To start with, offer to do small practical things your relative or friend has mentioned. That way, they will not feel embarrassed by the attention. It is important to offer only what you can manage. Do not try to do too much.

If you have offered to cook meals, remember that people with cancer may have a smaller appetite. Or they may find things taste different because of treatment. If they do not eat what you have made, it is not an insult to your cooking. You could try asking them if there are any foods that they enjoy right now. Putting small portions on a smaller plate may also help.

Spend time together

It can help to spend regular time with your relative or friend. If you make plans, try to be reliable. Short, regular visits can be something they can look forward to.

Go to appointments

People with cancer may want to take someone with them when they see the doctor or nurse. They often feel anxious about these appointments and may forget questions they wanted to ask. They may ask you to go with them. You could offer to help them prepare for the appointment.

You may find these suggestions useful:

- Offer to write down the questions they want to ask.
- Avoid speaking for your relative or friend, unless they ask you to. This may mean they forget what they wanted to say.
- Listen carefully to the information and answers the doctor gives. It may help to take notes or ask the doctor if you can record the conversation. This way, your relative or friend will not miss anything the doctor says.
- Ask if there is any written information available. This can help you and your relative or friend understand more about their cancer type and its treatment.

Help during and after appointments

Your relative or friend may find it hard to take in information, especially if they are given bad news. Sometimes they may not be able to talk or think clearly for a short time. If you have their permission, this could be a good time to ask the questions you know they wanted to ask. You can also write down a phone number or email address for the clinical nurse specialist (CNS) or cancer doctor. That way your relative or friend has someone to ask if they have more questions. They may also want to talk again about what they have been told.

You can remind your relative or friend afterwards of what the doctor said. They may want you to listen as they talk about any choices they need to make. You may also want to read through any written information you have been given. Remember to check with your relative or friend first if they want to know this information.

You can also call our support line on **0808 808 00 00** to talk about any treatment choices and to ask for more information.

You may also feel upset by the news given to your family member or friend. Supporting someone when you feel upset can be hard, so it is important to get support for yourself.

Involve other people

It is important to remember that there are limits to what you can do. It is impossible for you to do everything. Involve other people where possible, if your relative or friend agrees to this. For example, you could set up a rota to cook meals, get shopping or to take them to hospital appointments.

You may be able to find people with skills you do not have. For example, someone else may be able to help with gardening or housework. We have more ideas on ways to help your relative or friend in our booklet [Looking after someone with cancer](#).





What your relative or friend may be facing

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Uncertainty

Most of us like to know what is going to happen to us. It helps us feel secure about our future. Having certainty about things is a basic human need. We all like to feel in control. But people with cancer often feel control has been taken away from them. They may feel uncertain about their future and what is going to happen to them.

You can help your relative or friend by talking to them about how difficult it must be to face this uncertainty. You could also help them by talking about some of the things they can still control. These may be small things, such as when to go for a walk, what to eat or what to watch on TV. Or it may be a big decision, such as whether to have chemotherapy or asking for a second opinion about treatment.

The fear of death

Although many people with cancer can be cured, your relative or friend may have a fear of dying. It may always be in their thoughts, even if they do not talk about it.

Even when people are cured, they often still worry the cancer may come back. This fear may get less over time. But it is important to give your relative or friend a chance to talk about it. You can support them by listening to their worries.

We have more information about coping with uncertainty on our website. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/uncertainty](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/uncertainty)

“The Macmillan nurse, Sara, brought in the imam to talk to dad. This was a great burden lifted from us as a family and it would never have been achieved without Macmillan’s relationship with the imam and the mosque. ”

Suad, carer for her father

Physical effects of cancer

Cancer and its treatments can have different physical effects, which can also affect your mood and emotions.

Tiredness (fatigue)

Tiredness is very common in people with cancer, especially during treatment. It can be there all the time, or it may come and go. This often depends on the treatment someone is having. Tiredness can make someone feel low in mood or irritable. It can also affect their concentration and memory. We have more information in our booklet [Coping with fatigue \(tiredness\)](#).

Eating problems

Cancer treatment can sometimes cause people to:

- feel or be sick
- have a change in their appetite
- have changes to their sense of taste, making some foods taste bad, or all foods taste the same.

We have more information in our booklet [Eating problems and cancer](#).

You can order our booklets and leaflets for free.
Visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.



Changes in appearance

Cancer treatment can cause changes in appearance. These may be temporary or permanent.

Possible changes include:

- hair loss
- gaining weight or losing weight
- scars from surgery
- skin changes, such as rashes, dry skin, spots or redness.

Changes in our appearance can make us feel vulnerable and self-conscious. Your relative or friend may worry about how other people may react, or how the changes may affect their relationships.

Most people need time to get used to body changes. Support from family or friends can help. Remember they are the same person you have always known. If they want to, let them talk to you about their feelings.

We have more information about coping with changes in appearance in our booklet [Body image and cancer](#).

Changes to their role

During cancer treatment, many people stop doing the things they usually enjoy or do well. This might include stopping work, or stopping activities that involve being with other people. These activities can reassure us that we are competent, needed, talented or funny. They remind us that other people value our skills, knowledge and humour.

These activities can also give us a sense of self-worth. This is also known as self-esteem. Having positive self-esteem is about having confidence and respect for yourself. Not being able to do these activities can affect a person's self-worth and how they think about themselves.

Remember your relative or friend is still the same person, even if they have had to cope with losses and changes. Their skills and qualities are still there, even if they do not have the chance to use them as much right now.

It might be helpful to think together about what they still want to do and can do, even if it is something small. Whatever they decide, it is important to support them.

Loneliness and isolation

Some people feel isolated from their family, friends and workmates. People may not know what to say, and may not visit or get in touch. You can help by:

- [keeping in regular contact](#)
- [being a good listener.](#)

You can encourage other people to do the same.

Depending on others

Many people find it hard to think of themselves as someone who has cancer. If they need other people more than normal, they may feel they are weak. But even if we like to think of ourselves as independent, we all depend on each other at different times in life.



Difficult emotions

It is natural for people with cancer to have a mix of emotions. This can include sadness, fear and anger. These emotions can come and go at different times.

You may also be coping with your own strong emotions. It is important that you have other people you can talk to and get support from. There are also various [organisations that you might find helpful](#). This will help you. It will also help you support your relative or friend.

If your relative or friend is distressed

It can be upsetting to see someone we care about crying. But crying is a natural response to distress, and it can be a helpful release. Some people do not want to cry. They may feel that if they start, they will not be able to stop. This is not true, as feelings can come and go.

Responding to distress

If your relative or friend cries, reassure them that it is okay to cry. This will let them know you understand that they are upset. Touching, holding hands or giving them a hug may help too.

You may think you need to stay strong for them, but it is okay if you need to cry too. Being honest about your feelings will help build trust between you. It will also make it easier for the other person to be honest about their feelings. It can help them to know they can open up, rather than try to protect you by keeping their feelings from you.

It is good to be honest about your feelings, but try to keep focused on your relative or friend's feelings. This does not mean you do not need support. It is really important that you also have people you can talk to about [how you are feeling](#).

If your relative or friend is angry

There may be times when your relative or friend gets frustrated or angry about what is going on. Sometimes you may feel this is directed at you. They may be irritable or critical of your attempts to help. They might be angry about the cancer, but find it hard to put into words. They may take out their feelings on the people closest to them. This can be difficult, especially when you are doing your best and are also coping with your own feelings.

Responding to anger

Be ready to let go of smaller arguments and try to be understanding and supportive.

If your relative or friend is irritable or critical, try not to take it personally. Remember these are common reactions to being diagnosed with cancer. If you feel upset or angry, give yourself time to calm down before you respond.

After a disagreement, find a time when you are both calm to talk about what happened and how you both feel. Instead of saying, 'You always criticise me' or, 'You make me feel sad', try to say something like, 'I felt upset when we disagreed today. Can we work this out together?'

In most disagreements, both people have some responsibility. Listen to what your relative or friend tells you. Ask yourself, 'Do they have a point?' and, 'Could I do anything differently?' Talk about what both of you could change to make things work better.

Try to resolve the disagreement by the end of your talk. A hug or a kind word can help resolve the disagreement and make you feel closer. But this does not mean you should put up with an abusive relationship. If your relative or friend is being verbally or physically abusive, ask someone you trust for help.

Here are some tips on coping with anger:

- Try not to take it personally. Remind yourself they may be upset because of the cancer, rather than with you.
- Find a time when you are both calm to talk about it.
- Look for solutions you can both agree on.
- Get support for yourself from someone outside of the relationship, such as a friend or counsellor.

If your relative or friend is in denial

If your relative or friend has been told they have cancer, it can be hard for them to accept. This is called denial, and it is a normal reaction. There are different ways a person may experience denial. They may accept some parts of their situation and not others.

If the person with cancer is in denial, it can be very hard to talk to them. There are certain things they may not talk about.

It may be upsetting for you, but denial is a strong coping tool and needs to be respected. It is important to listen to what they say. Some people will eventually accept their situation, but some choose to stay in denial. If that happens, try to accept it.

Counselling

Usually, people with cancer and those close to them adjust and find ways to cope with anger or anxiety. But sometimes people need outside help to deal with the strong emotions they have.

You or your relative or friend may be struggling with anger, anxiety or depression. It may be hard to share this with family or friends.

A GP, cancer doctor or specialist nurse may suggest professional support. Seeing a trained counsellor or psychologist can give you or your relative or friend a chance to talk to someone outside the situation. They can also help explore feelings and find ways of coping.

You can call the [Macmillan Support Line](#) on **0808 808 00 00** for more information about finding a counsellor. Or you can contact the [British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#).



Take care of yourself

Look after yourself

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Look after yourself

Supporting a person with cancer can bring you closer. But it can also be demanding and sometimes upsetting. It is important to make sure you look after yourself and have the support you need.

If you are tired, it is important to rest. This may seem obvious, but many people carry on, even though they are tired. They then feel exhausted later. It is also important to get enough sleep.

Give yourself time to do things you enjoy. This will help you feel rested and relaxed. Try to include things that:

- keep you in touch with other people, such as having lunch with a friend
- make you feel you have achieved something, such as exercising or finishing a project
- make you feel good or relaxed, such as watching a funny film.

We have more information in our booklets [Cancer and relationships](#) and [Looking after someone with cancer](#).

Get help from other people

Many people feel better if they have support from other people. If you need some support to deal with your own feelings, you should not feel bad about this.

Sometimes talking to another family member or friend can be enough. Or you may find it helpful to talk with your relative or friend's specialist nurse. They can tell you if there are any local support organisations or counselling services that can help you.

If your employer has an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), you can contact a counsellor that way. You can also contact Macmillan's cancer support specialists on **0808 808 00 00**.

Organisations such as Samaritans, the [British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy](#) or the [UK Council for Psychotherapy](#) can also give you more information and support.

You may want to join an online support group or chat room. The Macmillan Online Community is a website where you can chat to other people, blog about your experiences, make friends and join support groups. You can share your own thoughts and feelings and get support. Visit macmillan.org.uk/community

Supporting someone with cancer may be new to you. Every person is different and there is no one way to get it right. It is important to remember that your relative or friend will be grateful that you care.

If you give unpaid support to someone who could not manage without you, you may be a carer. We have more information for carers on our website. Visit macmillan.org.uk/carers



Further information

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About our information

We provide expert, up-to-date information about cancer. And all our information is free for everyone.

Order what you need

You may want to order more booklets or leaflets like this one.

Visit be.macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

We have booklets about different cancer types, treatments and side effects. We also have information about work, financial issues, diet, life after cancer treatment and information for carers, family and friends.

Online information

All our information is also available online at macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support You can also find videos featuring stories from people affected by cancer, and information from health and social care professionals.

Other formats

We also provide information in different languages and formats, including:

- audiobooks
- Braille
- British Sign Language
- easy read booklets
- interactive PDFs
- large print
- translations.

Find out more at macmillan.org.uk/otherformats

If you would like us to produce information in a different format for you, email us at cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

The language we use

We want everyone affected by cancer to feel our information is written for them.

We want our information to be as clear as possible. To do this, we try to:

- use plain English
- explain medical words
- use short sentences
- use illustrations to explain text
- structure the information clearly
- make sure important points are clear.

We use gender-inclusive language and talk to our readers as 'you' so that everyone feels included. Where clinically necessary we use the terms 'men' and 'women' or 'male' and 'female'. For example, we do so when talking about parts of the body or mentioning statistics or research about who is affected.

To find out more about how we produce our information, visit [macmillan.org.uk/ourinfo](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/ourinfo)



Other ways we can help you

At Macmillan, we know how a cancer diagnosis can affect everything, and we are here to support you.

Talk to us

If you or someone you know is affected by cancer, talking about how you feel and sharing your concerns can really help.

Macmillan Support Line

Our free, confidential phone line is open 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Call us on **0808 808 00 00**. We can:

- help with any medical questions you have about cancer or your treatment
- help you access benefits and give you financial guidance
- be there to listen if you need someone to talk to
- tell you about services that can help you in your area.

Our trained cancer information advisers can listen and signpost you to further support.

Our cancer information nurse specialists can talk you through information about your diagnosis and treatment. They can help you understand what to expect from your diagnosis and provide information to help you manage symptoms and side effects.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing, call us using Relay UK on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the Relay UK app.

You can also email us, or use the Macmillan Chat Service via our website. You can use the chat service to ask our advisers about anything that is worrying you. Tell them what you would like to talk about so they can direct your chat to the right person. Click on the 'Chat to us' button, which appears on pages across the website. Or go to macmillan.org.uk/talktous

If you would like to talk to someone in a language other than English, we also offer an interpreter service for our Macmillan Support Line. Call **0808 808 00 00** and say, in English, the language you want to use. Or send us a web chat message saying you would like an interpreter. Let us know the language you need and we'll arrange for an interpreter to contact you.

Macmillan Information and Support Centres

Our Information and Support Centres are based in hospitals, libraries and mobile centres. Visit one to get the information you need and speak with someone face to face. If you would like a private chat, most centres have a room where you can speak with someone confidentially.

Find your nearest centre at macmillan.org.uk/informationcentres or call us on **0808 808 00 00**.

Help with money worries

Having cancer can bring extra costs such as hospital parking, travel fares and higher heating bills. If you have been affected in this way, we can help. Please note the opening times may vary by service.

Financial guidance

Our financial team can give you guidance on mortgages, pensions, insurance, borrowing and savings.

Help accessing benefits

Our welfare rights advisers can help you find out what benefits you might be entitled to, and help you complete forms and apply for benefits. They can also tell you more about other financial help that may be available to you. We can also tell you about benefits advisers in your area. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/financialsupport) to find out more about how we can help you with your finances.

Help with energy costs

Our energy advisers can help if you have difficulty paying your energy bills (gas, electricity and water). They can help you get access to schemes and charity grants to help with bills, advise you on boiler schemes and help you deal with water companies.

Macmillan Grants

Macmillan offers one-off payments to people with cancer. A grant can be for anything from heating bills or extra clothing, to changes needed to your home.

Call us on **0808 808 00 00** to find out more about [Macmillan Grants](#).

Help with work and cancer

Whether you are an employee, a carer, an employer or are self-employed, we can provide support and information to help you manage cancer at work. Visit [macmillan.org.uk/work](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/work)

Work support

Our dedicated team of work support advisers can help you understand your rights at work. Call us on **0808 808 00 00** to speak to a work support adviser.

Talk to others

No one knows more about the impact cancer can have on your life than those who have been through it themselves. That is why we help bring people together in their communities and online.

Support groups

Whether you are someone living with cancer or a carer, family member or friend, we can help you find support in your local area, so you can speak face to face with people who understand. Find out about support groups in your area by calling us or by visiting macmillan.org.uk/selfhelpandsupport

Online Community

Thousands of people use our Online Community to make friends, blog about their experiences and join groups to meet other people going through the same things. You can access it any time of day or night. Share your experiences, ask questions, or just read through people's posts at macmillan.org.uk/community

You can also use our Ask an Expert service on the Online Community. You can ask a financial guide, cancer information nurse, work support adviser or an information and support adviser any questions you have.

Macmillan healthcare professionals

Our nurses, doctors and other health and social care professionals give expert care and support to individuals and their families. Call us or ask your GP, consultant, district nurse or hospital ward sister if there are any Macmillan professionals near you.

Other useful organisations

There are lots of other organisations that can give you information or support. Details correct at time of printing.

Counselling

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

Tel **0145 588 3300**

www.bacp.co.uk

Promotes awareness of counselling and signposts people to appropriate services across the UK. You can also search for a qualified counsellor on the 'How to find a therapist' page.

UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

Tel **0207 014 9955**

www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Holds the national register of psychotherapists and psychotherapeutic counsellors, listing practitioners who meet exacting standards and training requirements.

Emotional and mental health support

Mind

Helpline **0300 123 3393**

www.mind.org.uk

Provides information, advice and support to anyone with a mental health problem through its helpline and website.

National Autistic Society

www.autism.org.uk

Provides advice and guidance for people with autism and their families.

Relate

www.relate.org.uk

Offers advice, relationship counselling, sex therapy, workshops, mediation, consultations and more.

Relationships Scotland

Infoline **0345 119 2020**

www.relationships-scotland.org.uk

Provides relationship counselling, mediation and family support across Scotland.

Samaritans

Helpline **116 123**

Email **jo@samaritans.org**

www.samaritans.org

Provides confidential and non-judgemental emotional support, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, for people experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

Bereavement support

Childhood Bereavement Network

Tel **0207 843 6309**

www.childhoodbereavementnetwork.org.uk

A UK-wide group of organisations and individuals working with bereaved children and young people. Has an online directory where you can find local services.

Cruse Bereavement Support

Helpline **0808 808 1677**

www.cruse.org.uk

Provides bereavement support to anyone who needs it across the UK. You can find your local branch on the website.

General cancer support organisations

Black Women Rising

www.blackwomenrisinguk.org

Aims to educate, inspire and bring opportunities for women from the BAME community. Shares stories and supports Black cancer patients and survivors through treatment and remission.

Cancer Black Care

www.cancerblackcare.org.uk

Offers UK-wide information and support for people from Black and minority ethnic communities who have cancer. Also supports their friends, carers and families.

Cancer Focus Northern Ireland

Helpline **0800 783 3339**

www.cancerfocusni.org

Offers a variety of services to people affected by cancer in Northern Ireland.

Cancer Research UK

Helpline **0808 800 4040**

www.cancerresearchuk.org

A UK-wide organisation that has patient information on all types of cancer. Also has a clinical trials database.

Cancer Support Scotland

Tel **0800 652 4531**

www.cancersupportscotland.org

Runs cancer support groups throughout Scotland. Also offers free complementary therapies and counselling to anyone affected by cancer.

Macmillan Cancer Voices

www.macmillan.org.uk/cancervoices

A UK-wide network that enables people who have or have had cancer, and those close to them such as family and carers, to speak out about their experience of cancer.

Maggie's

Tel **0300 123 1801**

www.maggies.org

Has a network of centres in many locations throughout the UK. Provides free information about cancer and financial benefits. Also offers emotional and social support to people with cancer, their family, and friends.

Penny Brohn UK

Helpline **0303 3000 118**

www.pennybrohn.org.uk

Offers physical, emotional and spiritual support across the UK, using complementary therapies and self-help techniques.

Riprap

www.riprap.org.uk

Developed especially for teenagers in the UK who have a parent with cancer. Has an online forum where teenagers going through similar experiences can talk to each other for support.

Tenovus

Helpline **0808 808 1010**

www.tenovuscancercare.org.uk

Aims to help everyone in the UK get equal access to cancer treatment and support. Funds research and provides support such as mobile cancer support units, a free helpline, benefits advice and an online 'Ask the nurse' service.

Financial support or legal advice and information

Advice NI

Helpline **0800 915 4604**

adviceni.net

Provides advice on a variety of issues including financial, legal, housing and employment issues.

Benefit Enquiry Line Northern Ireland

Helpline **0800 232 1271**

Textphone **028 9031 1092**

www.nidirect.gov.uk/money-tax-and-benefits

Provides information and advice about disability benefits and carers' benefits in Northern Ireland.

Carer's Allowance Unit

Tel **0800 731 0297**

Textphone **0800 731 0317**

www.gov.uk/carers-allowance

Manages state benefits in England, Scotland and Wales. You can apply for benefits and find information online or through its helplines.

Citizens Advice

Provides advice on a variety of issues including financial, legal, housing and employment issues. Use its online webchat or find details for your local office by contacting:

England

Helpline **0800 144 8848**

www.citizensadvice.org.uk

Scotland

Helpline **0800 028 1456**

www.cas.org.uk

Wales

Helpline **0800 702 2020**

www.citizensadvice.org.uk/wales

Civil Legal Advice

Helpline **0345 345 4345**

Textphone **0345 609 6677**

www.gov.uk/civil-legal-advice

Has a list of legal advice centres in England and Wales and solicitors that take legal aid cases. Offers a free translation service if English is not your first language.

Disability and Carers Service

Tel **0800 587 0912**

Textphone **0800 012 1574**

nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/disability-and-carers-service

Manages Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Carer's Allowance and Carer's Credit in Northern Ireland.

You can apply for these benefits and find information online or through its helplines.

GOV.UK

www.gov.uk

Has information about social security benefits and public services in England, Scotland and Wales.

Jobs and Benefits Office Enquiry Line Northern Ireland

Helpline **0800 022 4250**

Textphone **0800 587 1297**

www.nidirect.gov.uk/money-tax-and-benefits

Provides information and advice about disability benefits and carers' benefits in Northern Ireland.

Law Centres Network

www.lawcentres.org.uk

Local law centres provide advice and legal assistance. They specialise in social welfare issues including disability and discrimination.

Local councils (England, Scotland and Wales)

Your local council may have a welfare rights unit that can help you with benefits. You can also contact your local council to claim Housing Benefit and Council Tax Reduction, education benefits, and for help from social services (the Social Work department in Scotland).

You should be able to find your local council's contact details online by visiting:

England

www.gov.uk/find-local-council

Scotland

www.cosla.gov.uk/councils

Wales

<https://gov.wales/find-your-local-authority>

Macmillan Benefits Advice Service (Northern Ireland)

Tel **0300 1233 233**

Money Advice Scotland

www.moneyadvicescotland.org.uk

Use the website to find qualified financial advisers in Scotland.

NI Direct

www.nidirect.gov.uk

Has information about benefits and public services in Northern Ireland.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Tel **0344 892 0902**

www.nihe.gov.uk

Offers help to people living in socially rented, privately rented and owner-occupied accommodation.

StepChange Debt Charity

Tel **0800 138 1111**

www.stepchange.org

Provides free debt advice through phone, email, the website and online through live chats with advisers.

Unbiased.co.uk

Helpline **0800 023 6868**

www.unbiased.co.uk

You can search the website for qualified advisers in the UK who can give expert advice about finances, mortgages, accounting or legal issues.

Support for young people

Teenage Cancer Trust

Tel **0207 612 0370**

www.teenagecancertrust.org

A UK-wide charity devoted to improving the lives of teenagers and young adults with cancer. Runs a support network for young people with cancer, their friends and families.

Youth Access

Tel **0208 772 9900**

www.youthaccess.org.uk

A UK-wide organisation providing counselling and information for young people. Find your local service by visiting youthaccess.org.uk/find-your-local-service

Support for older people

Age UK

Helpline **0800 678 1602**

www.ageuk.org.uk

Provides information and advice for older people across the UK via the website and advice line. Also publishes impartial and informative fact sheets and advice guides.

Young Lives vs Cancer

Tel **0300 330 0803**

www.younglivesvscancer.org.uk

Provides clinical, practical, financial and emotional support to children with cancer and their families in the UK.

LGBT-specific support

LGBT Foundation

Tel **0345 330 3030**

lgbt.foundation

Provides a range of services to the LGBT community, including a helpline, email advice and counselling. The website has information on various topics including sexual health, relationships, mental health, community groups and events.

OUTpatients

www.outpatients.org.uk

Supports and advocates for LGBTIQ+ cancer patients in the UK, inclusive of all genders or types of cancer. Also produces information, and runs a peer support group with Maggie's Barts.

Support for carers

Carers Trust

Tel **0300 772 9600**

www.carers.org

Provides support, information, advice and services for people caring at home for a family member or friend. You can find details for UK offices and search for local support on the website.

Carers UK

Helpline **0808 808 7777**

www.carersuk.org

Offers information and support to carers across the UK. Has an online forum and can put people in contact with local support groups for carers.

Advanced cancer and end of life care

Hospice UK

Tel **0207 520 8200**

www.hospiceuk.org

Provides information about living with advanced illness. Also provides free booklets and a directory of hospice services in the UK.

Marie Curie

Helpline **0800 090 2309**

www.mariecurie.org.uk

Marie Curie nurses provide free end of life care across the UK. They care for people in their own homes or in Marie Curie hospices, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The Natural Death Centre

Helpline **0196 271 2690**

www.naturaldeath.org.uk

Offers independent advice on aspects of dying, funeral planning and bereavement.

Disclaimer

We make every effort to ensure that the information we provide is accurate and up to date but it should not be relied upon as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. So far as is permitted by law, Macmillan does not accept liability in relation to the use of any information contained in this publication, or third-party information or websites included or referred to in it. Some photos are of models.

Thanks

This booklet has been written, revised and edited by Macmillan Cancer Support's Cancer Information Development team. It has been approved by members of Macmillan's Centre of Clinical Expertise.

Thanks to the people affected by cancer who reviewed this edition, and those who shared their stories.

We welcome feedback on our information. If you have any, please contact **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk**

Sources

Below is a sample of the sources used in our talking information. If you would like more information about the sources we use, please contact us at **cancerinformationteam@macmillan.org.uk**

www.nhs.uk/conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/help-from-social-services-and-charities/getting-a-needs-assessment/ [accessed September 2023].

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else/carers-friends-family-coping-support/support-for-you/ [accessed September 2023].

www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help-you/contact-us [accessed September 2023].

Zeng Q , Ling D, Chen W, et al. Family Caregivers' Experiences of Caring for Patients with Head and Neck Cancer. A Systematic Review and Metasynthesis of Qualitative Studies. *Cancer Nursing* 2023; 46,1, 14–28.

Can you do something to help?

We hope this booklet has been useful to you. It is just one of our many publications that are available free to anyone affected by cancer.

They are produced by our cancer information specialists who, along with our nurses, benefits advisers, campaigners and volunteers, are part of the Macmillan team. When people are facing the toughest fight of their lives, we are here to support them every step of the way.

We want to make sure no one has to go through cancer alone, so we need more people to help us. When the time is right for you, here are some ways in which you can become a part of our team.

5 ways you can help someone with cancer

1. **Share your cancer experience**

Support people living with cancer by telling your story, online, in the media or face to face.

2. **Campaign for change**

We need your help to make sure everyone gets the right support. Take an action, big or small, for better cancer care.

3. **Help someone in your community**

A lift to an appointment. Help with the shopping. Or just a cup of tea and a chat. Could you lend a hand?

4. **Raise money**

Whatever you like doing you can raise money to help. Take part in one of our events or create your own.

5. **Give money**

Big or small, every penny helps. To make a one-off donation see over.

Please fill in your personal details

Mr/Mrs/Miss/Other

Name

Surname

Address

Postcode

Phone

Email

Please accept my gift of £
(Please delete as appropriate)

I enclose a cheque / postal order /
Charity Voucher made payable to
Macmillan Cancer Support

OR debit my:

Visa / MasterCard / CAF Charity
Card / Switch / Maestro

Card number

Valid from

Expiry date

Issue no

Security number

Signature

Date / /

Do not let the taxman keep your money

Do you pay tax? If so, your gift will be worth 25% more to us – at no extra cost to you. All you have to do is tick the box below, and the tax office will give 25p for every pound you give.

I am a UK tax payer and I would like Macmillan Cancer Support to treat all donations I make or have made to Macmillan Cancer Support in the last 4 years as Gift Aid donations, until I notify you otherwise.

I understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. I understand Macmillan Cancer Support will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give.

Macmillan Cancer Support and our trading companies would like to hold your details in order to contact you about our fundraising, campaigning and services for people affected by cancer. If you would prefer us not to use your details in this way please tick this box.

In order to carry out our work we may need to pass your details to agents or partners who act on our behalf.

If you would rather donate online go to macmillan.org.uk/donate



This booklet is about talking with someone who has cancer. It is for anyone who wants to support someone with cancer, including carers, family members and friends.

The booklet explains how to support someone who has cancer. We hope it helps you deal with some of the questions or feelings you may have.

At Macmillan, we give people with cancer everything we've got. If you are diagnosed, your worries are our worries. We will help you live life as fully as you can.

For information, support or just someone to talk to, call **0808 808 00 00** or visit [macmillan.org.uk](https://www.macmillan.org.uk)

Would you prefer to speak to us in another language?

Interpreters are available.

Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

If you are deaf or hard of hearing,

call us using Relay UK on **18001**

0808 808 00 00, or use the Relay

UK app.

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or call our support line.

Trusted
Information
Creator



Patient Information Forum