

Cancer and grief

Dealing with cancer is not just about doctors and treatments, it's about your feelings and thoughts as well. A cancer diagnosis brings with it an experience of loss and grief – let's call it what it is!

These losses bring changes which can affect anything from your work life, finances, family relationships and daily routines to the things we often take for granted like your ability to exercise, sleep, hold a conversation, read a book, shower and dress yourself or have an appetite to eat a regular meal. Let's not forget about changes to your appearance and maybe hair loss.

Your grief is about *how* you react to all this – what do you think, how do you feel and how do you behave? Don't be tempted to classify your responses into stages or set time frames. Everyone responds differently, yet many people share common reactions and are reassured to know they are not alone.

You might be told to “be strong and stay positive” – this is much easier said than done. A more helpful way of looking at it is to be open and honest about how you're feeling. There'll be good days and bad, shock and disbelief, tears and anger, you might feel overwhelmed or you might just have a pragmatic 'let's get on with this' approach – whichever way you go, know it's your normal, human and natural way to respond.

“Chemo aged my face and took all my hair – I hated looking in the mirror. But everyone said I was so brave that I didn't want to say how I really felt about all this. I wanted to cry but instead I just put on a brave face.”

Self compassion – a way to deal with your emotions

Sometimes we can expect too much from ourselves when we face a tough situation. Research shows that we often use more encouraging and empathetic language to others than we do when talking to or about ourselves. So self compassion is a way of being considerate and caring to ourselves – simply because we deserve it. Some practical ways to do this:

- **Accept your feelings and reactions.**
It's OK to be:
Sad Frightened Angry
Frustrated Anxious Overwhelmed
... and more
- **Allow your thoughts, it's OK to think:**
Why me? It's not fair.
I'm scared.
What if the treatment doesn't work?
How will I cope with all this?
I don't want my family to see me like this.
I don't want to die.
- **Say “No”** – without feeling you need to give a reason or explain yourself.
- **It's OK to cry** – males, females, adults and children all need to 'have a good cry' when their world is turned upside down.
- **Be gentle to yourself** – chill out with meditation, listening to music, taking a bath, light exercise, watching the waves on the beach.

*Remember, not only am I going to experience fear when I'm on unfamiliar territory,
but so is everyone else.*