

## **LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF DURING THE CANCER JOURNEY**

There are many different ways of getting through difficult times. When we feel low it seems like nothing will make it better. However, be open-minded to ideas that have helped other patients. Even if you feel a little better, this is great process.

### **Each day**

- Try to get out of bed and shower every day. Get dressed and take care with what you wear. Maintain your appearance and take pride in your presentation.
- Try to maintain a regular sleep routine. Get up and go to bed at the same time each day. Avoid too much daytime napping.
- Try tackling one small task each day (for example, tidying up one small area of the house, taking a short walk) and acknowledge this as an achievement.
- Give yourself permission to 'underachieve' and take time out. Try not to judge yourself harshly. This is the time to accept help, look after yourself and put your needs first.
- Try to set aside quiet reflective time at least twice a day. You could listen to a relaxation tape, some favourite music or practise meditation.
- Remember that each day is a new day. Approach each new day as a fresh start and remember that all 'bad' days come to an end just like any other day.

### **Looking after your needs**

- If you are usually strong and independent try accepting genuine offers of help from others. Try saying 'yes' when you would normally say 'no'. You might find yourself pleasantly surprised by others' generosity of spirit.
- If you usually struggle to say 'no' to others then it is very important that you begin to practise saying 'no' so that you don't overextend yourself. It is easy to fall into the trap of supporting everyone else through your cancer.
- Practise setting limits. Visitors, phone calls and enquiries about your wellbeing can be limited. Select who you wish to talk to – you don't always need to answer the phone. Hospital staff can put a note on your door requesting that visitors stay a maximum of 10 minutes. Organise yourself with email lists and / or a central person of contact (not yourself!) to deal with concerns from others.
- Reach out to others. If you can't talk to friends, try helplines and community support groups. This is a good way of making contact and sharing with others in a similar situation. There comes a time in all our lives when we need help. The skill lies in the ability to know how to accept it.
- Be assertive with your medical team. Bring along someone else to appointments, write down questions before an appointment and ensure you clarify what you don't understand. If you don't understand something – it may be that it has not been explained very well – it is not that you are stupid!

### **Looking after your relationships.**

- This may be a time when you discover who can be a support for you and who cannot. Different people may be better at providing different sorts of support (for example, lifts and meals rather than listening to your concerns). Be prepared to be pleasantly surprised by someone who comes 'out of the woodwork' and disappointed by others who you thought would be there for you.

- You may need to open the discussion about your cancer as others may be concerned about upsetting you or reminding you about it, or feel a loss about what to say and do. Guide them. If they offer help, have suggestions ready. For example: 'I would love to go out for a coffee later this afternoon', 'Do you want to come and get a wig with me? I could do with another opinion' or 'It would be great if you could pick up Susie from her dance lesson next Friday.' Most people who offer assistance will genuinely want to help you, they just need to know what you need.
- Examine your relationships and see which ones drain and deplete you. You may need to adopt protective strategies from these relationships at this time.
- Find those who can be of support to you. If there is no-one you feel would be helpful, then seek some emotional support from outside. There are many sources of support in the community, such as support groups, helplines and spiritual centres.

### Looking after your emotions

- There is no right or wrong way to feel. It is likely that you will feel a whole range of emotions including fear, anger, frustration, sadness, loneliness and guilt in no particular order – patients often describe cancer as a 'roller-coaster ride'. With support from family, friends and your treatment team, most of your stronger feelings settle over time.
- If you are concerned about how intense your emotions are or if they are beginning to interfere with being able to get on with life, do seek help. Accepting offers of support or asking for assistance helps many patients get through a very difficult time.

**Extracted from:** MacDonald, Mandy, 'Depression' in Hodgkinson, Dr Katharine; Gilchrist, Dr Jemma (eds), *Psychosocial Care of Cancer Patients: A Health Professional's Guide to What to Say and Do*, Ausmed Publications (2008, Melbourne), 105, 106.

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