

Your emotional wellbeing

Your emotional wellbeing is an important element in your ability to go forward with confidence. It is also an area that may have been neglected during your treatment when the focus was on your physical needs and the medical aspects of your cancer.

A diagnosis of cancer is a serious and stressful life event. Both you and your loved ones may have felt very emotional throughout your treatment and as an antidote to the intensity of those feelings you may have focused on the end of your treatment as the point at which your emotions would return to normal.

However, you may now be finding it an unexpectedly difficult time. Your desire to get 'back to normal' could be causing you more stress than when you were going through treatment.

Another common experience is to be in 'coping' mode through treatment and to not really feel any emotions. Without realising it, you pushed your emotions to the side as a way of getting through the treatment process. However, now your treatment is over these emotions can well up unexpectedly and quite forcefully and you may have found yourself quite overwhelmed by them.

Stress

Stress is a physical, biological and emotional reaction to a challenging or threatening situation. Its purpose is to prepare you for action so you can respond to the stressor. When you are stressed the body secretes hormones which help you to physically react and your mind becomes very attentive to any potential threats in the environment. In many instances the stress response is very helpful when it is short lived, for example in a dangerous situation where you might need to fight the threat or run from the danger.

The problem with Stress

Stress can be a problem when it becomes prolonged. If the body is constantly engaged in the stress response, for example through ongoing fears and worries about illness, this overuse of the response can prevent it from working so well, which will impact on your whole body. Prolonged stress can affect the ability of the immune system to respond efficiently and affect your overall physical and emotional health.

The specific effects of prolonged stress are different for everyone. For some it might manifest itself in the form of muscle tension or headaches, others experience mood swings - feeling very irritable or very lonely. The sense that you are 'not yourself' is a common feeling. Whatever your signs and symptoms, the important thing is to learn to recognise them as indicators of stress and to address them before they have a serious impact on your health and wellbeing.

Managing stress

People often cite a lack of time, or even guilt, as reasons why they do not make time for things that they enjoy. However, doing these things can reduce stress and contribute to an overall feeling of wellbeing.

Shifting your focus and behaviours towards more pleasure seeking activities may feel strange, especially as your recent focus has probably been on managing the negative side effects of treatment. Have a think back over the past year. When did you take time to do something you really enjoy, just for the sake of it?

What are three things you enjoy doing? If you feel that these activities are too much of a challenge just now, it might be possible to modify them a bit.

You might also find it helpful to include these activities as part of your weekly goals. Even setting a goal to do one of these activities in the next week can help you to feel more in control, give you something to look forward to and reduce feelings of stress.

Relaxation

Believe it or not, learning to relax can take practice. You are probably aware of a general compulsion to be always doing something, and when 'relaxing' find yourself still doing things, such as reading or watching TV. In the busy modern world, it's possible to forget what real relaxation feels like.

It is also possible to become stuck in the stress response as a result of your cancer diagnosis and its treatment. Your concerns and anxieties may have switched on this response without you realising it and you might not have noticed how it is affecting you day to day.

When you relax your heart rate decreases, your muscles relax, your breathing slows and your thinking becomes clearer. For many people it induces a feeling of wellbeing. Although relaxation alone may not solve the issues contributing to your stress, it will help you to attain a better physical, mental and emotional state to manage them.

Managing worries

As you start to move forward after treatment it is likely you'll find concerns about everything from your health, to relationships, to work occupying your mind. Some of these worries might feel overwhelming and make it difficult to get on with your life or enjoy things. However, there are a number of things you can do to prevent these worries from interfering with your wellbeing.

Acknowledge them

Probably the last thing you feel like doing is giving more time to your concerns, but talking about or writing them down can make it easier to start addressing them. Sometimes things seem less scary or overwhelming when they are written down or shared with a trusted friend. It's about taking a first step to solving them which can help you to feel more in control.

Organise them

Once you have acknowledged your worries, the next step is to identify those concerns you can do something about and those which seem out of your control. This is where writing the worries down or sharing with a friend can help you as you'll have a clear list to work through. You may even be able to identify some steps you can take towards solving those concerns which currently feel out of your control.