

Talking about your cancer

Why talk?

Telling family and friends about your cancer can be very difficult, especially if you are worried about how they will cope with the news. You may be afraid that you will break down and cry when you start talking. You may also be worried that people will let you down if you ask them for help. Often women say that they have always been the one that everyone else came to with their problems. If this is how it has been for you, then you probably don't have much experience of telling others your worries, or asking for their help. Talking to doctors about intimate and personal details can also be confronting. So why do we recommend that you talk about your cancer if it is so hard? The simple answer is that it helps.

Talking to family and friends

Just as the word 'cancer' was shocking to you, it is likely to be frightening for your family and friends. They will be confronted with a number of issues when they hear about your diagnosis. They may be shocked, and afraid that you will die. They may be afraid for you, but also for themselves. Having somebody close to you diagnosed with cancer is a powerful reminder of how fragile our lives are. If it can happen to you - it can happen to them.

A cancer diagnosis can disrupt the strongest of relationships. You may have been friends with someone for years, and felt they were always 'there for you'. Then you are diagnosed with cancer and they seem distant. This doesn't mean that the relationship is poor; it is just that up until now it has not had to face this particular challenge. With the best will in the world, family and friends often find themselves doing or saying the wrong thing, or just not knowing what to say.

Difficulties talking to family and friends usually fall into three categories:

You need to talk and they won't let you

Many women find that they want to talk about their cancer, but they find that others don't want to talk about it when they do. You may find people try to change the subject, or tell you not to "dwell" on it.

Even when they say, "How are you Mum?" I don't tell them. I say, "Oh, I'm pretty good". I don't say I feel scared. And I don't say it because they will say: "Oh you are dwelling on it". And I am not. I just want to talk to someone.

These reactions from others usually happen because they are frightened. They may also believe that talking about it will make things worse for you. Try telling them that it will help you to talk about your feelings.

They only want to talk about cancer

Other women find that family and friends stop talking to them about the everyday things. Cancer takes over, and they feel as if they are seen as 'the cancer' rather than a woman who has cancer. It is true that, compared to your cancer diagnosis, everything else may seem less important. But the everyday things are the mortar that keeps the bricks of our lives together. If, at times, you want to talk about something other than your cancer, let people know. They are probably afraid to talk about the everyday or unimportant things for fear that you will feel that they are not taking your situation seriously enough.

You don't want to talk about cancer

There may be times when you just don't want to talk about it. This is a normal reaction when you are emotionally overloaded. Just as your emotions probably go up and down, so too will be your need to talk through your worries and fears. Most people use denial as a normal and effective method of dealing with very threatening or overwhelming news. It is only when denial is prolonged - going on for many weeks - and causes a breakdown in communications between you and your family (or healthcare team) that it becomes a problem.

Women who have been through what you are now facing have often said, "You sure find out who your true friends are". This may be a little harsh. If friends and family fail to provide the kind of support you are hoping for, it is often because they don't know how best to be helpful. They want to say something that will make everything OK, or do something to make you feel better. So when you talk to family and friends it is a good idea to set some ground rules.

1. Tell them that it is OK to not know what to do or say. They don't have to pretend to know the answers. Neither do you.
2. Tell them that it is OK to talk about your fears and their fears. It will not make your condition worse, and it is likely that, once they have been talked about, they won't seem quite so scary.
3. If they start talking about an issue that you do not want to discuss with them at the time, tell them so. Tell them that right now you are overloaded, and reassure them that, when you are ready, you will discuss the issue with them.
4. Tell them that sometimes you may not be able to find the words that express your feelings. We don't always need to talk, a hug can often say more than words.
5. Tell them that you will need them to help you with specific things. It is not OK for them to say, "Let me know if there is anything that I can do". This is the time when you need to tell them specifically how they can best be helpful.

"I lost 10 kilos and I had no hair and everyone was saying to me, 'oh you look great'. People can't be honest with you, they say this and that, but you know deep down they are not telling you the truth. That's the hard part".

“It's like your friends are there and they say they understand and everything. But they don't understand. They haven't been through it”.

“Sometimes female friends would cross to the other side of the street or duck into the nearest shop because they couldn't face the fact”.

When people don't know what to say or do, they feel uncomfortable. Being given a practical task can make them feel useful. Here are some suggestions for ways they can help:

1. Cook some tasty meals that just need heating up for you and your family
2. Take a bundle of washing and ironing home with them
3. Take care of your garden
4. Take you to appointments
5. Take you out for a coffee or a movie
6. Send you letters and cards to let you know they are thinking of you
7. Help with tasks in the house that you are finding difficult
8. Act as a gatekeeper - it is often a good idea to nominate someone that others can ring to find out how you are. This can take the pressure off you and your family
9. Be there for your family - see how they are doing
10. If you have young children - help with getting them off to school and to after school activities.