

Receiving news of a serious illness can be very traumatic. The illness could be one of any number of different diagnoses – such as cancer, heart disease or motor neurone disease. We will all respond differently to such news. This leaflet cannot therefore be specific to you but is given out with the hope that something in it may be of help either now or in the days ahead.

It is about *living* with serious illness. With advances in medicine, more and more people are living full unrestricted lives whilst knowing that they have a serious illness. Below are some pointers to help with this.

### **Understanding Your Emotions**

Whether you find out your diagnosis suddenly or more gradually, it can often affect a person with a whole mixture of emotions. You may well find it very difficult to take it in and be tempted to deny it altogether. There may be anger, fear, despair, or a willingness to do anything that will change the prognosis. This is normal. Even after initial treatment is over, and maybe your friends are expecting you to get back to normal, you may still experience many differing emotions. Again, this is normal.

### **Talking About Things**

Many people find that one of the most helpful things is finding someone to whom they can talk about their fears and feelings. It can help you know that you aren't alone, and it can stop your fears from getting bigger and bigger.

Talking as openly as possible with family and close friends can be helpful, but remember that they may also be experiencing different emotions in response to your illness. You need to go at a pace that suits both you and them.

Unfortunately, people with a serious diagnosis sometimes find that family and friends avoid them or deny the illness altogether. This may be their way of coping or it may be that they simply don't know what to say and are afraid of saying the wrong thing. You may need to help them!

It can also be helpful to have someone from outside the family to talk to – a friend or a professional. (See end for contact numbers.)

### **Being in Control**

Fear and uncertainty may be a part of what you are feeling. Some people are just happy for the doctors to make all the decisions about treatment etc, but others want to be clear about the different options, about the likely course of their disease and to be able to make their own decisions.

Don't be afraid to ask your specialist as many questions as you want. It may help if you can write down some questions before you go to see the specialist. It can also help to take someone with you who will help you remember the answers. But don't ask questions if you do not in fact want to know the answers.

You can always make an appointment to chat things through with your GP, or perhaps speak to a district nurse or a Macmillan nurse. (See end for contact numbers.)

The Internet can be a useful source of information, but do remember that not all you find there is accurate or helpful. However, for many diseases there are specific support groups, which can help. There are also specialist nurses at the hospital whom you can contact.

Remember that there is no fixed pattern. On the one hand, surprising remissions can happen, and, on the other hand, a disease can sometimes progress faster than expected.

### **How then shall we live?**

For some people, discovering that they have a serious illness causes them to take stock of their life – looking at how they've lived so far and deciding how they want to live in the future. Some find that it gives them the motivation to deal with regrets from the past. They may ask themselves things like 'Are there friends or family members with whom I need to make peace?' 'Do I still harbour resentment about some things?' 'Do I need to take steps to forgive myself or others, or to ask for forgiveness?'

For many, the realisation of a serious diagnosis provides the opportunity to think about where they want their life to go in the future. It can provide the incentive to do some things that they have always wanted to do and never got round to - places they want to visit, people they want to see, relationships they want to develop. It may involve decisions about work. All of these take time and emotional energy so don't be afraid to give yourself time to think about them. Again talking with someone else can be helpful.

Some people find that it makes them consider their own mortality, to realise that life does not go on forever for any of us. It leads them to think about the spiritual side of life and death and to ask things like, 'Do I believe in God?' 'Is it important to me' and 'Do I need to do anything about it?'

## Being at Peace

Knowing that you have a serious illness can make it very hard to find peace. Here are some things that have proved helpful for some people.

- i. Accepting yourself as you are – with all your emotions and your limitations. Allowing yourself to be you and knowing you are still of value as a human person.
- ii. Living in the present rather than the past or the future. Taking one day at a time and being grateful for it.
- iii. Knowing that there is a God of love who is bigger than your problem. Jesus said, 'Come, all who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest'.
- iv. Illness sometimes makes people very inward looking and for some people it is helpful to actively look for ways of encouraging or helping other people.

### A Prayer For You

May you discover that  
the road you didn't choose,  
didn't want to travel,  
Is a highway that leads  
unerringly towards the light.

(Francis Copsey)

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May the light of God lead you,  
the power of God hold you,  
the joy of God heal you,  
the grace of God bless you,  
and the love of God caress you.

(Ruth Burgess)

### Useful Contacts:

- Your own GP Your GP is always willing to take some time to talk with you about your illness. Please book an appointment.
- District Nurses Tel: 0118 949 5083
- Macmillan Nurses Tel. 978 7843

[www.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.macmillan.org.uk) is a useful website for anyone with a serious illness. There is a lot of information that is not just cancer specific.

[www.healthtalkonline.org](http://www.healthtalkonline.org) is a site where you can both get information about and hear peoples' personal experience of different types of illness.

# Living with Serious Illness