

Coping strategies for living life with cancer.

The cancer journey can be brutal, both physically and psychologically. Just as cancer affects your physical health, it can trigger a wide range of emotions that you're not used to dealing with. Chronic anxiety, fear, bewilderment, anger, guilt, blame, loneliness, alienation, hopelessness, despair – all are common, all are normal. Living with cancer can also make existing feelings more intense, compounding entrenched psychological predispositions you may already have.

Your friends and family members will be on their own cancer journeys and may share many of the feelings that you have. That's why it can be really helpful to open up to one another about all the difficult thoughts and feelings you are having. You have much in common.

Very quickly, your life can feel out of control. You may wonder if you're going to live. Your normal routine is disrupted by doctor visits and treatments. You are bombarded with medical terms you don't understand. You feel like you can't do the things you enjoy.

But there are always ways that you can take charge and feel more in control of things. It can help to learn as much as you can about your cancer because the more you know, the more you will feel in control. Ask your doctors and nurses questions and don't be afraid to say when you don't understand something. For some people, it feels better to stay busy (learning something new can be a very effective way to stave off troubling thoughts and feelings). For others, there is a need to slow down a little and make time for oneself.

Putting your life in order can help. Be involved in your treatment (ask questions, keep appointments). Make some changes to your lifestyle – adopt some new routines/habits. Set a daily schedule of activities – the more you plan, the easier it is to get things done. Prioritise tasks that feel overwhelming and too difficult to start, breaking them down into smaller steps if necessary. Go easy on yourself - you have a lot to worry about but try not to dwell excessively on your fearful thoughts. Do what you can to enjoy the positive parts of life.

Coping styles vary by individual. Often the family values instilled in you growing up affect how you think about and cope with cancer. Some people feel they have to be strong and protect their friends and families from what they are going through. Others are support-seekers and turn to loved ones and cancer survivors. Some seek help from counsellors or other professionals. Others may turn to their faith to help them cope. Many people find that a combination of the above helps best.

Coping with difficult emotions takes practice but there are a few things that can help. Pay attention to the 'hygiene factors' – eat well, sleep well, think about reducing alcohol intake, exercise regularly. Find ways to help you relax – deep breathing exercises, mental imagery or visualization, meditation, yoga, reading. Be as active as you can be. Look for things you enjoy. Look at what you can control.

Expressing your feelings to others can be one of the most effective ways of coping with difficult emotions. Look for the positive where you can but don't put pressure on yourself to feel positive all the time. Life is difficult for you right now and you need to allow yourself

to have a degree of self-compassion. Above all else, don't blame yourself for your cancer. Don't try to be upbeat if you are not, try to be your authentic self. And don't let people force you to talk about your cancer if you don't want to. You choose when to talk about your cancer, not anybody else.

Cancer can be a wake-up call for some and make you realise the importance of enjoying the little things in life. You might want to think about going places you have never been. Finish those projects you have started but never completed. Spend more time with people you love and enjoy. Pay attention to the things you do each day that make you smile, even now, and try to do more of the things that feel special to you. When you can, embrace the things that bring you joy.

Even when you are living with cancer, there are many reasons to feel hopeful. Millions of people who have had cancer are alive today. Your chances of living with cancer, and living beyond it, are better now than they have ever been before. People with cancer can, and often do, lead active lives, even during treatment. Some doctors think that hope may actually help your body deal with cancer.

Helpful techniques for holding the hope include planning your days as you've always done. Try not to limit the things you do just because you've cancer. Look for reasons to have hope. If it helps, write them down or talk to others about them. Spend time in nature – sunlight, fresh air and the sounds of nature can really help. Most of all, be kind to yourself and congratulate yourself for carrying on in whatever way you can manage in spite of your cancer diagnosis.