

How to manage ... Coping with the news of a terminal diagnosis

Learning that you or someone you love has a life-limiting illness is one of the most distressing and difficult events that can happen in a family. The points below may be helpful to anyone with this diagnosis and their loved ones as they move forward.

First Reactions

There is no right or wrong way for people to feel when they receive such a diagnosis. Hearing that your illness cannot be cured can be a frightening experience – and many people will be unable to take everything in.

Give yourself the time to take in what is happening. You might want to be on your own. Or you might need to spend time with your partner, family or friends, to help you deal with the news. You may experience a range of emotions from fear and anger to relief and acceptance. This is normal.

As hard as it can be, try not to push your emotions aside completely. At some point, it's better to express how you feel if you can manage it, even if it's uncomfortable and hard to cope with.

Telling others

Sharing the news with others is not easy. Think about who you want to tell about your diagnosis. The first people you talk with are often those you are emotionally close to.

Tell who you want or need to tell, and don't feel pressured to tell anyone else. Remember too that you don't need to tell everyone all the details of your diagnosis. You can tell them as much or as little as you wish.

At some stage, you will need to tell those people who will help you “put your affairs in order” – your lawyer, financial advisor, accountant and various other healthcare providers.

Living with your diagnosis - One step at a time

What you are dealing with can feel overwhelming, but you may be able to make it feel less so by thinking about it as smaller “pieces”. Decide on some small achievable goals to help you manage. This could be something like finding out what support is available in the community, talking to a counsellor or just making small changes to your daily routines to make them more manageable.

You can still think about bigger issues, such as where you would like to receive your care in the future, but don't feel that you need to tackle everything at once.

Living with Uncertainty

Knowing that you have a life-limiting condition inevitably leaves you living with uncertainty. You will probably have questions to which there are no definite answers, such as how and when your body is going to change, the effect this will have on your independence and your relationships, what will happen at work, and exactly how much time you have left. Not knowing exactly what is going to happen to you can feel overwhelming and upsetting. Remember to continue to ask health professionals for help and support.

Look after yourself

Try to take some time to do things that you enjoy. Schedule activities to look forward to. It really can lift your mood. Energy levels will dictate what you can do and it's important to learn to manage these. You will probably need to build in rest time to replenish your energy levels.

Complementary therapies, such as massage and relaxation therapy, may help you feel better.

If friends and family offer help, try to accept this and give specific examples of support you need and would like. For example, someone might be able to help by taking you shopping, bringing you some meals to put in the freezer, mowing your lawns or driving you to appointments.

Living Well

Remember that memorable moments of our lives don't just happen on exotic holidays or during highly anticipated events. They happen all around us, every day, whether we see them or not. Sometimes it is the simple pleasures that give us the most satisfaction.

In the weeks or months ahead, if you find yourself overwhelmed by what is ahead, tell yourself it's all right to just stop and take time for yourself. Watch the sunset. Hold your spouse's hand or that of your child. Spend quality time with your pet. Listen to the birds sing. Do whatever you need to do to find a simple moment of joy. You might not have the gift of time, but you certainly can make the most of the time that you have.