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# What do I need to know when my loved one is diagnosed with cancer?

Cancer is a word that strikes fear and dread in most people. It will bring about many changes to the lifestyles and personalities of patients and their loved ones. The fact is, many of us are not physically and emotionally prepared for such changes.

*A Closer Look at the psychological and social aspects of cancer.*

As the number 1 killer disease in Singapore, cancer does not just affect the body; it also touches the mental and emotional aspects. From the moment a patient is diagnosed with cancer, he is likely to go through a rollercoaster ride of emotions ranging from shock, anger, denial, feeling of helplessness to depression.

Now, we all know that looking after the psychological states of a cancer patient and his family members are important. Hence, caregivers are becoming more aware that it is as important to heal the mind and soul of cancer patients, as it is to provide





medical treatment. As Robin Williams' character in 'Patch Adams' said, "Treat the disease and sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. But treat the person, and I'll guarantee you'll always win, no matter what's the outcome."

## Acceptance leads to control

It takes a lot of effort for a patient to finally acknowledge that cancer is part of his life and to grow to 'own' his cancer. Patients often lose their sense of self-worth and value, especially if they suffer hair loss or lose a limb, or become dependent on others to care for them. Many struggle with questions of "Why me?" and "Why now?" When they can find the answers, they come to accept their condition.

## Finding new meaning in life

It is often hard for a cancer patient to be optimistic about the future. Not knowing how long he will live or how long he needs treatment makes it difficult for a patient to plan his life. Even when a patient is in remission, there is a lot of fear that the cancer will return. Any little ache or discomfort in his body can trigger the fear that he is having a relapse.

## Changes in lifestyle and family roles

Due to the intensity of treatment, a patient may feel frustrated with having to visit the hospital frequently, the side effects of treatment and the limitations that he faces as his body tires from treatment.

Cancer brings changes in the roles of family members. Caregivers also often experience sleep disturbances, fatigue, anxiety, depression, emptiness and fear. Sometimes, a spouse has to take on the role of the other parent when he or she is very sick. Younger adult cancer patients, especially those with dependant children, may suffer more psycho-social problems than older patients. Family conflicts

and problems with re-allocation of roles are also more severe for patients with children of school-going age.

## Helping patients to cope

We need to help patients cope with the side effects of treatment and the symptoms of their illness. Sometimes, they may be tempted to give up treatment, or even think about suicide to end their suffering.

## Loss of financial security and relationships

Cancer can drain a family's finances because of frequent treatment and expensive drugs for chemotherapy. The family's financial stability is shaken when it is the sole breadwinner who suffers from cancer.

Cancer can change the pattern of relationships among family members and friends. Some elderly people do not understand cancer and think that it is contagious. Friends may stay away because they are afraid that they may say the wrong things, may not know how to respond to the change in a person's appearance, or it brings back memories of a loss or death they experienced in the past. Some don't know how to deal with the possibility of a patient's death. The loss of relationships for these reasons only add to a patient's feeling of loneliness and isolation.

## Facing the end

Death is a topic that is not easy to talk about. It is often distressing for a family to let their loved one go. Sometimes, they may also have conflicting feelings of relief and guilt, that their loved one has been 'released' from the pain and suffering when death comes.

So, if you have a loved one or friend suffering from cancer, just remember that all they need is your presence, care and support to help them through their daily lives.

*If you need a listening ear as you help to care for a loved one suffering from cancer, or if you need more information about the disease, you can speak to our specialist nurses at 6773 7888.*

