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The Irish Cancer Society is the national charity for cancer care dedicated
to eliminating cancer as a major health problem, and to improving the
lives of those living with cancer.

This booklet has been produced by the Nursing Services Unit of the Irish
Cancer Society to meet the need for improved communication,
information and support for cancer patients and their families
throughout treatment and afterwards.

We thank all those patients, families and professionals whose support and
advice made this publication possible.

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Published in Ireland by the Irish Cancer Society
© Irish Cancer Society 2003, revised 2005

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Cancer Society.

ISBN 0 9532369 0 1
How this booklet will help you

It can be very difficult to come to terms with the fact that you have cancer. You may find it hard to talk about what's happening to you and how you feel. Almost all people with cancer find it awkward and embarrassing to talk about it with family and friends. You may also feel awkward talking to the nurses, doctors and other professionals looking after you. This booklet has been written to help you to find ways to talk about your cancer.

In this booklet you will find some simple guidelines, which will make it easier for you to ask for what you want and need. They will help you to talk about what you are feeling, if and when you want to. The booklet will also help you to understand why your friends, family and even medical team, may find talking to you awkward. There are ways that you can help them.

This booklet will help you to understand the common types of reactions to being told you have cancer. It will also help you to understand something of what your friends and family may be feeling. After reading the booklet you may find it easier to talk about your feelings and to ask for the help and support you need.

There is no single ‘correct’ way to talk about your feelings. There is no magic formula, which you have to stick to. This booklet will help to make communication between you and those around you easier. The more you talk openly about your feelings, the more the people close to you will be able to help you.

For more information: Page 30

Many people and organisations can help. There is a list of useful organisations, some books that might help and a list of the most
frequently asked questions at the back of this booklet. The Irish Cancer Society’s Helpline Freefone 1800 200 700 can give information about all aspects of cancer and people who can help. The Helpline is available to take your call weekdays 9a.m.-5p.m.

Why it’s difficult to talk about cancer

The moment at which you are told you have cancer is almost always a moment of deep distress. In fact, most people say that they have never faced a bigger and more daunting challenge. Many people have to cope with various crises such as marital problems, financial problems or problems with family members. However, most of those will seem far less serious than facing a diagnosis of cancer.

You may feel almost paralysed mentally by the news. It can help to spend a moment or two thinking about why that can happen. Understanding a feeling is the first step in dealing with it.

Your feelings

‘When I heard that word “cancer”, my mind went completely blank. I don’t think I heard a single word the doctor said after that.’

When you first hear that you have cancer, however positive the future might be, you can experience very strong feelings of shock and disbelief. This is a normal way to feel. The fact of cancer, as something that is happening to you, is something most of us are
unprepared for. Even if you have feared that your problem is cancer, the moment at which that fear is confirmed is still very distressing.

There are many aspects to this feeling of shock. Most people think of cancer as a serious and perhaps fatal disease. You may fear the possibility of unpleasant treatment or that the cancer will cause you pain. You may worry about becoming a burden to your family, not being able to work and so on.

In quite a lot of people the feeling of disbelief is accompanied by a desire to shut out and deny the news. Most people use denial as a valuable method of dealing with very threatening news when they first hear it.

Denial is a normal human coping strategy. It allows you to take serious news on board without having it swamp you totally. It is only when denial is prolonged – going on for many weeks or months that it becomes a problem. Denial may cause a breakdown in communications between you and your family (or healthcare team). You may come to realize that you are using denial or someone close to you may point that out to you. Do not blame yourself or feel that you must hurry to overcome it. It may well be a normal reaction, which in time will allow you to accept the news and deal constructively with it.

Coping with feelings of shock, disbelief and denial can make it difficult for you to talk about your situation. You may not be used to talking about deeply personal and intimate matters. If that has been your pattern in the past, then you are going to find it difficult if you want or need to talk about your feelings. Again, being aware of this will help you a bit. The rest of this booklet will help you even more.

There are other feelings that may make you want to withdraw and
not to communicate with the people around you. You may feel
guilty and think that in some way you have brought this on
yourself. This is a very common feeling. You may be unsure and
embarrassed about how you will react when you talk to other
people. You may be afraid that you will cry. You should not worry
about this, as crying is often a good thing because it allows easier
communication. You may be worried about how your friends or
family will react. Will they withdraw from you? Will they judge or
condemn you? Will they blame you? Or you may be worried that
talking about the disease might hasten its progress. For example, if
you openly discuss your concern that the treatment might not
work, then it won't. Of course that is nothing more than
superstition, but it still worries quite a lot of people.

You may find it difficult to talk about your needs and wants.
Once you are diagnosed with cancer, there are people
around who want to help you. It is much better for you if
you can say what it is that you need or want. You'll be
surprised how many people are really quite glad to hear
clearly from you what your needs are.
Other people’s attitudes

You may worry that the people you want to talk to will feel uncomfortable talking about these things, and you are probably right. In our society serious subjects such as cancer are not openly discussed. Nobody feels very comfortable talking about cancer. It's not the fault of your friends or family—and it's certainly not your fault—it's just the way things are at the moment. There are signs that things are changing. Society is slowly getting more accustomed to talking about serious personal subjects, particularly if they involve health.

The people around you may have no idea what to say. To make it worse they may feel that they ought to know what to say. They want to help you but do not want to upset you further by saying the wrong thing. So rather than face you without that imagined magic formula, they may tend to avoid you altogether. There are people who never have had a serious or threatening illness themselves or known anyone else with one. They may be unsure of what you want, and not know how to ask you. They may also be worried about how you'll react. Your relatives and friends may think they won't know what to do if you cry and so on.

Again, this booklet will show you how you can help them overcome these anxieties. Another booklet in this series, *Lost for words: how to talk to someone with cancer*, is specifically written for them. If you would like a copy call the Cancer Helpline Freephone 1800 700 200.
The benefits of talking

So, if it's so difficult, why bother? Why is it worth talking about what's going on if it makes you and your friends feel uncomfortable? Talking openly will do a great deal to help you through any difficulties that may lie ahead.

How talking can give you support

Most people seem to get comfort from talking to each other. Fears or concerns, which are voiced, are somehow put into perspective by talking about them. That's probably the basis of the old proverb ‘a sorrow shared is a sorrow halved’.

There are probably things that you have been thinking about, and about which you can't make up your mind. You'll often find that you have already decided on the answer without being aware of it. You may only realise the answer when you phrase the question. In other words, talking about something often teaches you how you feel about it.

If your listener hears your fears or concerns, and then simply stays with you, that also changes your attitudes to what you had been thinking or worrying about. It makes you feel that your fears or worries are normal. If your friend can hear about them and not run away, then perhaps these fears are not as bizarre or strange or ugly as you feared. Talking about a fear or a worry often stops it growing in your mind. Very often when you are thinking a lot about something that is worrying you, the fear or concern seems to get bigger. It seems to grow in size in your imagination until it becomes very threatening, even overwhelming. Once the fear or concern is out in the open and is being discussed, that process of amplification often stops.
Conversation around something we feel deeply about can produce a special closeness. Talking about something important or personal produces a bond between the participants, which is valuable in itself.

**How to feel more in control of your situation**

Very often, when the diagnosis is cancer, you may feel as if you have little or no control over the disease or its treatment. There is often one treatment plan, which offers a chance of improvement, and no real alternative. Certainly you can always decide not to have any treatment. Sometimes that’s the right decision, but often it isn't. That feeling of ‘I haven't got a choice really’ is very common. It's also very unpleasant. It may lead to feelings of powerlessness and resentment.

You will feel more in control if you find out as much as you can about your cancer and its treatment. Ask your doctor about what side effects you can expect before starting treatment. The more information you have about your situation and the better you become at talking about it, the more you will feel involved in your own care. If you and your family understand your illness and its treatment you will be better able to cope.

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**Who should you talk to?**

If you want to talk, who is the best person to talk to? Well, the first part of the answer is: to whom did you speak about your biggest worries before this? If there is someone in whom you've always confided your most serious worries or problems, then of
course, that person should be on the top of your list now. You may not have a soul mate. Ask yourself this question. Who is the person that I could imagine would make me feel most comfortable talking about difficult problems? It might be anyone. For example: your spouse, your closest friend, your mother, sister, brother or religious leader. It may even be somebody you quite like but haven't until now, been on close terms with.

In fact, you may find it difficult to talk to someone close to you about your cancer. You may find it easier to speak to someone else such as a business partner or an acquaintance. If you can't think of anybody you would like to talk to, discuss this issue with your doctor or nurse. There may be counsellors or social workers that can help you identify the most suitable person in your circle.

There are many support groups that have been set up to support people with specific cancers. There are also support groups for people of all age groups who share common problems when a diagnosis of cancer is made. The Cancer Helpline Freefone nurses will advise you of the different support groups that are available.

Some people find support groups very helpful. They may form bonds with other members that are deeper and more significant than almost anything in their past. But other people get embarrassed or uncomfortable talking about personal issues with strangers. If groups are not your style, don't worry.

You may find it useful to go through the following questionnaire. It may help you to identify people you know who are most likely to be helpful to you.
Your support group

There are many different ways of being supportive. Some of these have been put into a table, which you can fill in and use. This will help you to go to those people who are best able to give the sort of support you need at a particular time.

How to use the table

Fill in as many boxes as you can with the names or initials of the appropriate people. Try to include different people in different boxes so that you are not relying on just a few people for everything. The many different sorts of support will increase the likelihood of your being able to do this. However, you might find that some boxes remain empty and that the same name appears in several boxes. Neither of these is unusual.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of support</th>
<th>Names (fill in)</th>
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<tr>
<td>People who make me feel good about myself</td>
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<td>People who help me to cheer up</td>
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<td>People who help me feel positive about my future</td>
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<td>People I can talk to about my physical symptoms</td>
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<td>People I can talk to about my emotions</td>
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<td>People who are good listeners</td>
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<td>People I can be totally myself with</td>
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<td>People who give me honest criticism when I need it</td>
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<td><strong>Type of support</strong></td>
<td><strong>Names (fill in)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>People who help me to see all sides of a situation when I'm making a decision</td>
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<tr>
<td>People who have the same interests and hobbies as me</td>
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<td>People I can reminisce with</td>
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<td>People I can talk to about spiritual matters</td>
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<td>People who give me sound advice about legal matters</td>
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<td>People who give me sound advice about financial matters</td>
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<td>People who give me sound advice about employment matters</td>
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<td>People who are frank with me about my illness</td>
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<td>People who give me explanations about my illness and treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>People who are coping well with cancer</td>
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<tr>
<td>People who benefit from talking to me</td>
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</table>
How to ask for what you need and want

So now you've identified the person with whom you stand the best chance of having supportive conversation—what next? Well, first of all simply because you have cancer doesn't mean you're not allowed to talk about anything else! Most people find it quite normal to talk about the minor aspects of everyday life as well as the major issues confronting them. Talk about the day-to-day things if you want to, and when you want to. But when it comes to talking about your current situation, here are a few hints that may make the conversation easier:

- Try to decide which are the things that you really want to talk about. Quite often you'll find that it's only two or three things that you really want to discuss.

- In order to introduce the topics that matter to you, it's quite helpful if you can give a headline first. It may be something such as ‘Look, I want to say a couple of things that are on my mind. Is that OK with you?’ By doing this you will alert your listener to the fact that what follows is something that really matters to you.

- Try to be specific about the things that concern you. You can start off talking about awkward subjects with phrases we all use. ‘Can we talk about the way things are at the moment’ or something like that. You will then find it's easier to move to more specific areas. ‘Look, I'm just not sure how long I'm going to be in hospital this time’. If there is something you've been worrying about a lot, it's perfectly OK to say so. ‘For the last few days, I've really been wondering about...’ etc. That way you'll
ease your way into important topics and your listener will be
drawn into focusing on what it is you want or need.

- When you're doing the talking it's a good idea to break up your
  own speech to see if the other person is following you. You can
  use any little phrase you like to do that: ‘Do you see what I
  mean?’ or ‘Does that make sense to you?’ or the more universal
  ‘Are you with me?’

- Towards the end of the conversation try to make sure that
  what you've said has been heard. If you have asked for some
  things to be done, for example, it's worth summarizing: ‘So you'll
  ring your mother about next weekend, and also ask Mary collect
  the children on Friday’. After you've covered the main topics,
  don't feel embarrassed to go back to small talk. ‘Let's talk about
  some little things. I like talking about small things, ordinary
  things’. The heavy bricks of important issues would just collapse
  without normal human nattering in between!

- A lot of people ask whether humour is a good thing to use
  when talking about tense issues and subjects. If humour was
  useful to you before you were ill, it will be useful to you now.
  Humour can be used to help you cope with a stressful situation.
  It may help you to draw a frame around something that is
  threatening. Laughing at it helps to reduce its importance and
  the size of the threat. If humour has been part of the way you
  have coped with threatening crises in the past, it will help you
  now. If on the other hand you have not used humour as part of
  your armour in the past, this may not be a good time to start
  doing so.
How to talk about your feelings

You might not be used to talking about your own feelings. If you try it, you may feel a bit awkward. When something serious happens, particularly a diagnosis like cancer, you may find that although you want talk about how you feel, you are not used to it. You may feel a bit clumsy. This is a normal way to feel.

If you (or your listeners) have strong emotions that are not talked about, you won't be able to talk about any subject easily. An emotion that nobody admits to has a paralysing effect on all conversation. So if you or your listener are feeling angry or embarrassed or very sad, then until one of you accepts that fact, your conversation will feel very sticky. Both of you will be preoccupied and will not be listening. The moment one of you acknowledges the emotion. ‘I'm sorry I seem in such a bad mood today, but I've just been told that...’ You will suddenly find communication much easier.

So here are some useful guidelines:

- Always try to acknowledge any strong emotion, your own or your listener's.
- Always try to describe your feelings rather than simply display them. There's a great deal of difference between saying ‘I'm feeling really angry today because...’ which starts a conversation and simply showing your anger by being curt or rude (which stops conversation).
- You are perfectly entitled to feel any way you like! The way you feel is the way you feel. Emotions are not right or wrong. It is only if you try to cover up any strong feeling that problems really become unsolvable.
Don't be afraid to tell the other person how much she or he means to you. Again, in our daily lives we don't often do that. But when there is a crisis, it's really worthwhile to explain to the other person how you feel about them.

Don't be afraid to acknowledge uncertainties. If you don't know how you feel, or if you don't know what is going to happen or how you are going to cope, you should say so. More harm is done by pretending that you do know, than by confirming that you don't.

There are many occasions when words aren't needed. Holding someone's hand or hugging or simply sitting together in silence can often achieve as much or more than words, once you are both clear about the situation.

Everybody has some regrets in their life. Don't feel that you are not allowed to express any regrets you feel. More than any other emotion, regret is reduced when it is shared, and may even prove a double bond between you and your listener.

How to respond to other people's reactions

Even though you are the person facing the diagnosis of cancer, you may have more difficulty in dealing with your friends' emotions than with your own. This is because when people are unable to cope with their own emotions, they tend to avoid the situation altogether. So your friends might be very tempted to stay away from you. They may not want to face the fact that they have strong emotions and don't know how to deal with them.
Always try to acknowledge your friend's feelings. If you are a good guesser, then the ideal is to identify your friend's emotion and what caused it. This can be quite simple, such as ‘You look as if you're feeling really uneasy when I talk about the cancer’ or ‘I guess coming here makes you very upset.’ In an ideal world, of course, this wouldn't be necessary. Your friend would be able to explain what he or she was feeling and then bring the focus on to you and what you want to talk about. But this isn't an ideal world, so you may have to do some of the groundwork to get the support you need.

Don't be afraid to acknowledge how you feel at the same time. ‘This is making both of us feel awful.’ Or ‘I know you're worried about what's going to happen next and so am I.’ The more you are each aware of your own feelings and the other person's, the better the dialogue will be.

If you get into some form of conflict (and that happens quite often) see the section called ‘Hints for resolving conflict’ later in this booklet.

If the other person is your spouse or sexual partner don't ignore the subject of sex. If you have had an active sex-life up until the illness, it will almost certainly be affected by the diagnosis. You or your partner may have a fear of the illness and of the treatment and resent the effect the illness has on your lives. You may also worry about how your partner may react to any change in your appearance. All of these tend to make both partners withdraw from each other physically and feel shy and awkward. Quite often, sex may stop completely. This may occur at a time when you most need to be reassured and cuddled. If that happens, then you must say so, as coolly and calmly as possible. Try to explain your needs and wants and to discuss what one, or both of you can do. Of course it can be
embarrassing to talk about these things. However, a very small amount of dialogue makes a great deal of difference. Ignoring the subject will cause serious resentment and mistrust on both sides. There is a booklet, *Sexuality and Cancer*, available from the Cancer Helpline Freephone 1800 200 700. You might find this booklet helpful.

**How to tell other people**

One of the most awkward and difficult aspects of being ill is the need to tell friends and family about the illness. You may feel that you do not know where to begin. If the person is your spouse or partner or a close friend, then it is usually possible to have her or him present when your doctor talks to you—that way you both hear the same thing.

If your friend cannot be present, you may find the following guidelines useful in telling her or him what the situation is:

- Try to get the physical setting right. You and your friend should go somewhere quiet and private to talk. Make sure that you are both comfortable and that you can look at each other's face easily and so on.

- It's always worth introducing the subject, rather than just starting off baldly. Something like ‘I think it would be best if I tell you what's going on. Is that OK?’

- Your friend may know some of what has been happening. It can be quite useful to ask about that, before you go over ground that has already been covered. ‘You probably know some of this already, so why don't you tell me what you make of the situation so far, then I'll take it on from there.’
It often helps to start with an opening statement. For example, if the situation is serious, you can actually say ‘Well, it sounds as if it might be serious’. If it’s worrying but sounds as if it will be all right in the long term you can say that.

Give the information in small chunks—a few sentences at a time. Ask your friend if he or she understands what you’re saying before you continue. You can use one of several little phrases for that purpose—things such as ‘Do you see what I mean?’ ‘Do you follow me?’ ‘Is this making sense?’ and so on.

There will often be silences. Do not be put off by them. You or your friend may well find that just holding hands or sitting together in the same room seems to say more than any words. If you find that a silence makes you feel uncomfortable, the easiest way to break it is with simple questions such as ‘What are you thinking about?’

When you tell someone close to you that something serious is wrong with you, he or she may feel very low and depressed, in sympathy with your situation. As a result of that you may well feel that you ought to put a positive side to the situation in order to relieve your friend’s feelings. If the facts of your situation support that, of course it’s good to do that. But if there is a great deal of uncertainty or worry about the future, you shouldn’t feel that you need to disguise that from your friend in order not to hurt her or his feelings. In other words, **try to stay as close to the real situation as you can.** It may be painful for your friend at this particular moment, but if you paint an over-rosy picture that then turns out to be wrong, your friend will be much more disappointed (and even feel hurt) later on.

You’ll find that these principles will make what is always a difficult conversation a bit less awkward. It’s not really fair that you should have to do so much, particularly at a time when your needs are so
great and many. However, it often happens like that, and in this way your friend will be much better equipped to give you support in the future.

**Talking to your doctors and other carers**

Conversations between you and your doctors or nurses or other carers may not always go smoothly. Feelings often run high on both sides. There are some ways in which you can increase your chances of getting what you want and need.

**Talking about your symptoms**

There will be occasions in which you are asked to describe your symptoms. These may include pain, nausea, and shortness of breath or some other medical problem. It's just as important to describe and talk about feelings and symptoms of depression and anxiety. You may find it difficult to explain your problems clearly.

Here are a few pointers, which may help:

- As you describe the problem, **try to be as factual and open as you can**. You may feel that you have to exaggerate pain or nausea in order to convince the doctor and produce better or more urgent therapy. At other times you may play down the symptoms to appear strong or brave. If possible, ignore both of these temptations. Try to describe the problems in as honest and factual terms as you can. It's not easy, but if you do that, you will end up with the full understanding of your doctor or nurse. If you try to overplay or underplay your problems, there is a risk
that they will feel out of touch and will be less able to help you. You don't need to convince your doctor of either the severity of your symptoms or of your own personal courage.

- **Use your own language.** Just because your doctors or nurses use medical jargon, you don't need to. There's nothing wrong with using your own words to describe the problem. In fact using jargon that you only partly understand might cause difficulties by giving the wrong slant to your problem.

- **When you're embarrassed, don't hesitate to say so!** You may find certain kinds of medical symptoms and problems embarrassing. They are very often the kind of personal matter you don't talk about to someone else. So when you start talking about something that is embarrassing, just say so (‘I'm sorry ... this is embarrassing to talk about’).
Asking for information

When it comes to getting information from your medical team, your own feelings and fears may make it a bit difficult for you to ask the right questions and to remember the answers.

Finding out more about your illness

Try to think of the most important questions before the discussion with your doctor.

You may find it helpful to write them down and bring the list with you. As well as a written list, it's a good idea to take a friend or relative with you. Often the other person can remember things that the doctor said which you later forget. He or she may also remember the questions you wanted to ask but haven't got round to yet. You may find it difficult to understand and retain medical information. It is even more difficult when it is serious and when it is about you. Nobody will mind you writing things down or making a list of your questions. Ask your doctor or nurse to write information down so that you can go over it again later. There are booklets, which discuss all aspects of cancer and its treatment, available. Call the Cancer Helpline Freephone 1800 200 700 for more information.

If you don’t understand ask again

Sometimes there won't be advance notice of an important subject. You might hear bad news quite unexpectedly. If you're not clear about what someone has told you, do ask him or her to explain. Once your doctor or nurse has answered your questions, it's not a bad idea for you to sum up that answer. Perhaps say something like

As well as a written list, it's a good idea to take a friend or relative with you.
‘So you're saying that’ or ‘if I've got that right, you mean that...’. These make it clear what you have understood. It may also encourage your doctor or nurse to explain things more clearly. You may need time to think about what has been said to you. You can always ask more questions at your next visit. Keep on asking questions until you have all the information that you need.

**Uncertainty**

Being concerned about your future is a normal way to feel. It can be hard for your doctor to predict the outcome of your treatment. Not knowing can make you feel anxious. The more you find out about your illness and treatment the less anxious you will be. It's good if you can accept that uncertainties about the future are common. When the conversation is about very serious matters that threaten your health or your view of the future, it's easy to imagine that your doctor or nurse knows what is going to happen but will not tell you. Usually, that's not the case. It may help if you can understand how progress will be measured. You can say ‘So you'll decide from the X-rays if the treatment is working’. This kind of information will help you.

If you are not happy with some aspect of your treatment, try and express those doubts, as diplomatically as you can. Most doctors and nurses, like all human beings, respond to constructive criticism well, and respond to destructive criticism either defensively or angrily. If you can voice your criticisms in a ‘tick what's right and cross what's wrong’ balance, you'll find that you are much more likely to get your needs met.
Hints for resolving conflict

When the diagnosis is cancer, people are often worried and nervous, and conflict is common. It might be conflict with your friends or family or with some member of your healthcare team. Of course a lot of complaints will turn out to be justifiable, and many can be resolved with time.

However, some patients find themselves getting almost uncontrollably angry with friends or the healthcare team. Some of this feeling is generated by the basic human reaction of blaming the messenger for the message. Somebody tells you that you have cancer. You may find it difficult to focus your anger on the cancer itself so you focus it on the person who tells you. The feeling that you have the misfortune to have this disease and the other person has not often increases your anger. In all events, it is quite possible that there will be conflict at some stage between you and somebody else.

Here are some guidelines that will help you:

- Whenever possible, try to describe your feelings rather than displaying them.
- Try to acknowledge all emotions—whether they are yours or the other person's.
- Try to separate yourself from the result of the argument. In other words try to stop feeling that your worth as a human being is tied to the outcome of the dispute. It's easy to imagine that if you win, you're a wonderful person, and if you lose you're not. That is untrue of almost every conflict known to humankind. So tell yourself that you are still a perfectly satisfactory person even if you lose this argument.
If there is an issue or an area over which you simply cannot agree, try to define that area even though you can't resolve it. In other words, aim to ‘agree to disagree’ on this issue.

Talk the dispute over with someone else. As you describe it, try not to turn the other party in the dispute into a monster. That way, you may see a way out of the argument simply by describing it, as it were, from one step away.

Talking to children

Talking with children about your illness or about their illness, if a child happens to be the patient, is especially difficult. We all think of childhood as a time of innocence and freedom from pain or guilt. We all hope that unpleasant or painful facts will never intrude on our children until they are older and have what we think are adequate coping skills.

Unfortunately, serious illness in the family does not respect the age of the people affected by it. Often, patients do need to tell their children what is happening. This is often the most awkward and painful part of the illness, but the following guidelines will help.

How to tell a child that you have cancer

Ask yourself if you would like some help with it. Very often, a member of your healthcare team being present at such a difficult time can be very helpful. The child can often focus any anger or resentment on the professional instead of on the parent. Also there may be questions, which are very difficult to answer—and again the professional can relieve you of some of that. So it's worth thinking about, and discussing with your healthcare team.
Ask if there is a doctor or a nurse or a therapist or social worker or anyone else who can and will help you.

**Explaining your illness**

Pitch the information at the level of the child's understanding, not the child's age. Children differ enormously in what they can understand and what they can't. Some five year olds can understand concepts that escape other children of ten. Check as you go along to see what the child is understanding, and tailor what you say to that. An open honest approach is usually the best way for all children.

**Repeat the information**

Be prepared to repeat the information. Children usually ask for important information to be repeated, perhaps several or many times. If the subject is painful to you, then you may be tempted to stop the conversation (‘I've answered that three times already—that's enough now!’). But when children ask for repetition, it's not because they are stupid or malicious, they simply need to check that you really meant what you said. So try and be more patient than usual and go over the ground again, being consistent with what you said last time.

**Blame**

Be aware of what is known as ‘magical thinking’. Children can feel very guilty when things go wrong around them. Whether they show it or not, children may somehow feel they are to blame for your illness. ‘If I'd tidied my room up like mum told me, she wouldn't be ill now.’ They need to be

An open honest approach is usually the best way for all children.

They need to be reassured that the illness is not their fault.
reassured that the illness is not their fault. It's often worth building that into an overall statement such as ‘this is just one of those bad things that happen occasionally and it's nobody's fault. It's not my fault, it's not the doctor's fault and it's certainly not your fault, it's just a piece of really bad luck.’

Explaining difficult or threatening facts to a child is always painful. These guidelines may help a bit, but don't hesitate to ask for whatever help is available to you. The Irish Cancer Society has a booklet, What do I tell the children?—A guide for a parent with cancer, which you may find helpful. Call the Cancer Helpline Freephone 1800 200 700 for a copy.
Conclusion

Serious illness is always perceived as a threat to health and life. You may want to shut the whole thing from your mind and hope that it will just go away. Sadly, that's not usually a helpful thing to do—for you or your friends. The hints and guidelines in this booklet will help you make real contact with your friends, at a time when the illness itself threatens to pull you away from each other. You will be quite surprised, and pleased, with the changes that can be brought about by these relatively simple techniques of talking and communicating.

The emotional contact that is generated between you and your friend or friends underlines many of the most important aspects of your life. The closer you are to someone, the more meaning you will both see in your life and the way you lead it. Many patients have said that being diagnosed with cancer had some unexpected benefits. For some people a crisis or a challenge can help them sort out what really matters in their lives. It may help you to decide who is a real friend and who isn't, who really matters and who is just an acquaintance.

Of course everyone who has cancer would much prefer not to have it, or to be cured of it. Often that can be achieved, but even if it cannot, the contact between you and your friends can be an extraordinary and wonderful proof of the value of human companionship. Serious illness may threaten a life, but it does not rob that life of meaning.
The Irish Cancer Society services

The Irish Cancer Society funds a range of cancer support services that provide care and support for people with cancer at home and in hospital.

Homecare nurses

Homecare nurses are specialist palliative care nurses who offer advice on pain control and other symptoms. These nurses work with GPs and public health nurses to form homecare teams bringing care and support, free of charge, to patients in their own homes. Based in local hospitals, health centres and hospices, they can be contacted through your GP or public health nurse.

Night nursing

The Irish Cancer Society can provide a night nurse, free of charge, for up to seven nights to families who are caring for a seriously ill person at home. If you need help, you can find out more about this service from a member of the homecare team, your GP or local public health nurse.

Oncology liaison nurses

The Irish Cancer Society funds oncology liaison nurses who provide information as well as emotional and practical support to the patient and his or her family. Oncology liaison nurses work as part of the hospital team in specialist cancer centres.

National Cancer Helpline

The National Cancer Helpline gives confidential information, support and guidance to people concerned about cancer. This is a freephone service. The specially trained nurses who staff the Helpline have access to the most up-to-date facts on cancer-related issues, using a computerised directory and library of...
resources. The nurses can provide information to anyone enquiring about treatment, counselling and other support services. They can also help you to make contact with the various support groups that are available. The Helpline 1800 200 700 operates weekdays from 9 am to 5 pm.

**Counselling**

Coping with a cancer diagnosis can be very stressful. Patients and their families sometimes find it difficult to come to terms with the illness. Many people feel that they cannot talk to a close friend or relative. Counselling can provide emotional support in a safe and confidential environment. Call the Helpline to find out about counselling services provided by the Irish Cancer Society and services available in your area.

**Cancer support groups**

The Irish Cancer Society funds a range of support groups for people with specific cancers. The support groups provide patients and relatives with information, advice and emotional support from time of diagnosis until as long as is needed.

**Cancer information booklets**

These booklets provide information on all aspects of cancer and its treatment. They also offer practical advice on learning how to cope with your illness. The booklets are available free of charge from the Irish Cancer Society.

**Patient grants**

A diagnosis of cancer can bring with it the added burden of financial worries. In certain circumstances, the Irish Cancer Society can provide limited financial assistance to patients in need. Requests for this kind of help should be directed through your social worker, GP or public health nurse.
Useful organisations

Irish Cancer Society
43–45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
National Cancer Helpline
1800 200 700
Tel: 01 231 0500
Fax: 01 231 0555
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie
Website: www.cancer.ie

Irish Association for Counselling
and Psychotherapy
8 Cumberland Street
Dún Laoghaire
Co Dublin
Tel: 01 230 0061
Fax: 01 230 0064
Email: iacp@irish-counselling.ie
Website: www.irish-counselling.ie

Mental Health Ireland
Mensana House
6 Adelaide Road
Dún Laoghaire
Co Dublin
Tel: 01 284 1166
Fax: 01 284 1736
Website: www.mentalhealth.ie

Bray Cancer Support &
Information Centre
36B Main Street
Bray
Co Wicklow
Tel: 286 6966
Email: besc@iol.ie
Website:
www.braycancersupport.ie

Cancer Information & Support
Centre
Mid-Western Regional Hospital
Dooradoyle
Co Limerick
Tel: 061 482615

Cancer Plus (support group for
parents of children with cancer)
Irish Cancer Society
5 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
National Cancer Helpline 1800
200 700
Fax: 01 231 0555
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie

CanTeen Ireland
Young Peoples’ Cancer Support
Group
c/o Carmichael Centre
Brunswick Street
Dublin 7
Tel: 01 872 2012
Email: canteen@oceanfree.net

Cork ARC Cancer Support
House
Cliffdale
5 O’Donovan Rossa Road
Cork
Tel: 021 434 6688

Support groups
& Support centres

ARC Cancer Support Centre
ARC House
63 Eccles Street
Dublin 7
Tel: 01 830 7333
Email: info@arccancersupport.ie
Website: www.arccancersupport.ie
Donegal Cancer Support Group
Clar
Co Donegal
Tel: 074 974 0837

The Gary Kelly Support Centre
Georges Street
Drogheda
Co Louth
Tel: 041 980 5100
Fax: 041 980 5101
Email: info@garykellycentre.org
Website: www.garykellycentre.org

Greystones Cancer Support
La Touche Place
Greystones
Co Wicklow
Tel: 01 287 1601

HOPE
Enniscorthy Cancer Support & Information Centre
6 Church Street
Enniscorthy
Co Wexford
Tel: 054 38555

The LARCC Retreat Centre
Ballinalack
Mullingar
Co Westmeath
Tel: 044 71971
Email: info@larcc.ie
Website: www.larcc.ie

Lios Aoibhinn Cancer Support Centre
St Vincent’s University Hospital
Herbert House
St Anthony’s Herbert Avenue
Dublin 4
Tel: 01 277 3545

Men Against Cancer (MAC)
c/o Irish Cancer Society
43–45 Northumberland Road
Dublin 4
National Cancer Helpline
1800 200 700
Tel: 01 231 0500
Fax: 01 231 0555
Email: helpline@irishcancer.ie
Website: www.cancer.ie

Mayo Cancer Support Association
Rock Rose House
32 St Patrick’s Avenue
Castlebar
Co Mayo
Tel: 094 903 8407

Slánú Cancer Help Centre
Birchall
Oughterard
Co Galway
Tel: 091 550050
Email: info@slanu.ie
Website: www.slanu.ie

Sligo Cancer Support Centre
2A Wine Street
Sligo
Tel: 071 70399
Email: scsg@tinet.ie

South East Cancer Foundation
Pairc Clinic
Lismore Park
Waterford
Tel: 051 590881

The Tuam Cancer Care Centre
30 Temple Jarlath Court
High Street
Tuam
Co Galway
Tel: 093 28522
Email: info@tuamcancercare.ie
Website: www.tuamcancercare.ie

Who can ever understand? Talking about your cancer
Turning Point – Positive Health Centre
23 Crofton Road
Dún Laoghaire
Co Dublin
Tel: 01 280 7888
Email: turningpoint@eircom.net
Website: www.turningpoint.ie

Useful contacts outside Ireland

American Cancer Society
1599 Clifton Road NE
Atlanta, GA 30329-4251
Website: www.cancer.org

Bristol Cancer Help Centre
Grove House
Cornwallis Grove
Clifton
Bristol BS8 4PG
Tel: +44 117 980 9500
Website: www.bristolcancerhelp.org

British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy
35–37 Albert Street
Rugby
Warwickshire CV21 2SG
Tel: +44 870 443 5252
Fax: +44 870 443 5161
Website: www.bacp.co.uk

CancerBACUP
3 Bath Place
Rivington Street
London EC2A 3JR
Tel: +44 207 696 9003
Helpline: +44 207 7392280
Website: www.cancerbacup.org.uk

Cancer Link UK
11–21 Northdown Street
London, N1 9BN
Tel: +44 71 833 2818
Fax: +44 71 8334963
Email: cancerlink@cancerlink.org.uk

Macmillan CancerLine
Macmillan Cancer Relief
89 Albert Embankment
London SE1 7UQ
Tel: +44 20 7840 7840
Email: cancerline@macmillan.org.uk
Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

National Cancer Institute (US)
Website: www.nci.nih.gov

The Ulster Cancer Foundation
40–42 Eglantine Avenue
Belfast 9BT9 6DX
Tel: 048 906 63281
Website: www.ulstercancer.co.uk

University of Pennsylvania Cancer Center
Website: www.oncolink.com
### Helpful books

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>ISBN</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cancer at Your Fingertips</td>
<td>Val Speechley &amp; Maxine Rosenfeld</td>
<td>Class Publishing</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>1-85959-036-5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Living and Dying with Cancer</td>
<td>Angela Armstrong-Coster</td>
<td>Cambridge University Press</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>0-52183-765-0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Taking Control of Cancer</td>
<td>Beverley van der Molen</td>
<td>Class Publishing</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1-85959-091-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bristol Approach to Living with Cancer</td>
<td>Helen Cooke</td>
<td>Robinson</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1-84119-680-0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What You Really Need to Know about Cancer</td>
<td>Dr Robert Buckman</td>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>0-33033-628-2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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For more details on helpful and up-to-date books and their availability, call the National Cancer Helpline 1800 200 700.
**Acknowledgements**

We would like to extend a special word of thanks to the following for their invaluable contributions to this booklet:

Marie Cox, Oncology Liaison Nurse  
Peter Kennedy, Medical Social Worker  
Nicki Martin, Medical Social Worker  
Noeleen Sheridan, Oncology Liaison Nurse  
Rory Wilkinson, Practice Development Nurse  
Susan Rowan, Patient Education Editor

We hope that this booklet has been of help to you. If you have any suggestions as to how it could be improved, we would be delighted to hear from you. Your comments would help us greatly in the preparation of future information booklets for people with cancer and their carers.

If, after reading this booklet or at any time in the future, you feel you would like more information or someone to talk to, please phone our National Cancer Helpline Nurses on 1800 200 700.

**Would you like to help us?**

The Irish Cancer Society relies entirely on voluntary contributions from the public to fund its programmes of patient care, education and research.

If you would like to support our work in any way – perhaps by making a donation or by organising a local fundraising event – please contact us.

**Irish Cancer Society, 43–45 Northumberland Road, Dublin 4**  
**Tel: 01 231 0500 Email: info@irishcancer.ie**