Impact of diagnosis on family and friends

A diagnosis of cancer can have a significant impact on family and friends. Many people find that friends and family are very supportive, but sometimes it can be disappointing when people don’t offer the support they feel they need. Some people find that family and friends don’t know how to talk to them about their cancer and tend to stay away. Others say that they are pleasantly surprised by the level of support and understanding provided by others.

Your family and friends may try to support you by putting on a happy face or by being overly caring. They may deny your illness or play down your anxiety or symptoms. Let your family and friends know when their behaviour upsets you. They will probably appreciate some direction on how to act. They might need support themselves and they may need advice about how they can help you.

The way family and friends cope and react has a direct impact on a person's cancer experience. Supportive family and friends can make all the difference.

As you express your own feelings, remember that others may need to do the same. They may experience similar fears and anxieties, and need as much information and advice as you do. Family members may feel angry too. They may express their own hurt at your outbursts, at the possibility of losing you, and at their inability to do anything about the disease. They may also fear how the illness will change their lives.

Often, family members are ready to talk at different times. Give them the space to talk when the time feels right.

If your family has difficulty talking about cancer to one another, it may help if they speak to a counsellor or the hospital social worker. If family members deny the reality of cancer or refuse to discuss it, encourage them to come with you to the doctor or the hospital when you are having treatment. This may help them accept your illness.