

### **What is counselling?**

Counselling gives you the opportunity to explore difficulties you are having in your life in a private and confidential space. A counsellor should never give advice or tell you what to do but should be supportive in helping you find your own solutions. These solutions are the only ones that will work long-term.

Counselling gives you a safe place to talk about painful and difficult feelings that you might feel guilty about or silly sharing with anyone else. It's a chance to talk openly without being judged or having to worry about what someone will feel about what you say. A counsellor can help you to recognise and use your own strengths and to look at your problems with greater insight.

### **How will it help me?**

Many people faced with a challenging time in their lives find it very helpful to be able to talk about how they are really feeling to someone who is not trying to fix it for them.

You can talk freely without worrying about a need to protect those close to you in case you upset them or are misunderstood.

Counselling can give you the space to think about what it is you need. It helps you to understand better what your needs are and explore how to say things to others that feel difficult or scary.

### **Counselling for cancer patients**

A diagnosis of cancer is a traumatic experience for most people. One minute you're 'normal' and the next your entire life has been turned upside down.

It can be hard, even impossible, to talk to close family or friends about the roller-coaster of emotions that you have been commandeered into riding.

A common attitude to a cancer diagnosis is the belief that a positive attitude is imperative to fighting the cancer battle.

Even referring to a battle implies winning or losing; the implication being that people who don't recover were not positive enough. This expectation that being positive is all that is required does not leave room for acknowledging fears and anxieties or talking about losses and grief. Family and friends can be so caught up in the belief that a positive attitude is essential that it becomes impossible to disappoint or frighten them by talking about the reality of what it is really like.

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, they and their family can feel shocked, disbelieving, frightened, without direction or just numb. They often feel they need to talk things through in confidence with someone who understands the emotional challenges of cancer.

Talking to an experienced cancer counsellor can ease the sense of isolation you may feel and help you find ways to face the challenges ahead. Similarly, relatives and friends can explore their concerns and anxieties openly without needing to shield the person who is ill.

### **Why cancer counselling?**

Research shows that counselling can be significantly useful in helping individuals and families face and meet the many challenges that a cancer diagnosis brings with it. This has been shown to improve their quality of life.

Counselling can help people affected by cancer, whether patient or families, to cope more easily with their emotional issues. They are also better able to communicate their needs with Health professionals.

Counselling helps in easing the tension in relationships with family and friends. Optimistic but realistic outlooks replace the burden of positive expectations.

Some responses you might have to receiving a diagnosis of cancer:

- Shock (What?? No!)
- Denial / Disbelief (It's a mistake, those aren't MY test results)
- Withdrawal (I can't/don't want to talk to anyone)
- Feeling isolated (Nobody understands)
- Anger (\*#@^!!!)
- Loss (But I've so much more I want to do with my life)
- Body image issues (Will I look like a freak?)
- Fears associated with sexuality and intimacy (No one will ever desire me now)
- Fear and uncertainty (What's going to happen to me?)

**Anything you feel is valid and deserves to be acknowledged, not only by those around you but also by you.**

Seeking individual counselling or becoming part of a support group can be where to find this acknowledgment.

After a cancer diagnosis, you can feel as though you have no control over what is happening to you and this can be very frightening. Uncertainty is often one of the most difficult things to deal with. You might feel as though cancer and its various treatments have taken total control of your life and this can lead to feelings of powerlessness.

Counselling allows you to take back some control over your life and provides you a sense of security again. It allows you to enjoy your life despite the illness.

While it can be terrifying to think about it, it is natural to want to know what is likely to happen to you, so that you can plan for your future.

Sorting out your affairs so that everything is in order can be very confronting but it can also be helpful. Even though it is likely to be painful for you and your family to talk about dying, it can also provide an opportunity to talk about what is important to you all and develop deeper levels of intimacy with each other. Regardless of how long the cancer patient lives, it can only benefit all if everyone is prepared to be authentic with each other. The greatest gift humans can give to each other is intimacy, i.e. having the courage to reveal the authentic self.

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