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## Managing relationships

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While relationships can be a great source of meaning, connection and enjoyment in people's lives, it is common for people to experience difficulties in their relationships with partners, friends, family members and colleagues. The experience of cancer can make existing difficulties worse and create new ones. Below we have put together some ideas which we hope will help you with your relationships. Some parts are particularly relevant to romantic relationships, though we feel the ideas are relevant to most types of relationship.

### Try to be open with each other

- Many people experiencing cancer can worry about burdening others and feel tempted to hide their thoughts and feelings from the people around them. There might be times when you would rather not talk about what you are going through and that is ok. But it can be worth thinking about some of the things that might be gained from speaking openly. For example, it can:
  - increase your sense of closeness and intimacy with others
  - limit the chance of difficulties building up
  - give others the chance to provide you with emotional and practical support
  - help the other person feel able to speak openly themselves.
- If you find it hard to speak openly, you could write down some of the things you would like to communicate first, and then give/send this to people or read it out to them.
- It can help to think about what help you want from others. For example, do you want advice? Do you want someone to listen? You can let other people know what help

you want or choose to talk to people who are more likely to give that kind of support.

- If it is hard to find time to speak, try working together to pick a time when this would be possible, and commit to this time on a regular basis.

### Repairing conflict

- It is normal to have some conflict and disagreement in relationships. Often it is the ways in which conflict is managed and repaired that can make the biggest difference to the health of a relationship.
- Repairing conflict in a relationship shows care and commitment towards the other person and your relationship with them. This can help to re-establish a sense of togetherness and connection.



- There are different ways of repairing conflict, and some are better for certain conflicts, times and relationships. For example, using humour can be a great way of repairing a problem but, if used at the wrong time, it can send the message that you are not taking the problem (or person) seriously.
- Other ways to repair a relationship problem include:



- Showing curiosity (eg “What’s your view on this?”)
  - Validation (eg “It makes sense that you feel that way”)
  - Showing accountability (eg “I can see how I had a role in this”)
  - Apologising (eg “I am sorry for hurting your feelings”)
  - Showing a desire to work together to reduce the chances of a conflict happening again (eg “How we can try to make sure that this does not happen again?”).
- If an argument becomes too heated or overwhelming, try to take a break (eg 20 minutes) and then plan a time for talking about the situation when you have both had some time to think, and to feel calmer.

### Have fun together

- Routine and predictability can help people to feel safe and secure in relationships. However, it is just as important to make space for fun and excitement in your relationships.
- Laughter is a great stress buster, so maybe start getting in touch with your silliness by hiding little notes for each other or texting a funny joke.
- Try to think about each other’s favourite hobbies and ways in which you might be able to treat each other (eg buying your partner their favourite type of popcorn), or even try discovering something new together.



- If your health means that some of the things you could previously do together are no longer possible, try to think about different ways in which you might be able to re-create them (eg organising a ‘date night’ at home instead of going out for a date).

### Keep going with other sources of joy and meaning

- People can feel the pressure that a romantic relationship should ‘complete’ us. Relationships can be a huge source of fulfilment for many people, but when they are seen as the source of fulfilment this can put a lot of pressure and strain on our relationships.
- In order to reduce this pressure, it can be helpful to spend time with other people and passions. This can help you to have a sense of independence.
- Doing other things is also likely to improve your relationship simply through having a positive knock-on effect on how you are generally feeling. It also gives you more to talk about.

### Speak about intimacy and sex

- Whether you are in a relationship or not, it can help to think about yourself as a sexual person, and to decide what is important to you.
- The way you feel about sex may change after receiving a cancer diagnosis or going through cancer treatment. For example, you might notice differences in how often you want solo sex or sex with someone else. Or you might notice that your sex life is affected by the side effects of treatment. Or your confidence in your body might have changed.
- Listen to yourself and share with your partner how you are feeling – intimacy is an emotional and physical experience and so talking openly about your concerns can be helpful.

- Sex can mean many different things, and if you don't feel like having sex as such, then maybe think about other forms of intimacy. Holding hands and hugging can help you feel close and connected.

## Do I feel safe?

Your relationships might not always be safe. Please remember that if you feel unsafe (or have concerns that you might become unsafe), there are services you can contact.

- Police: When someone calls 999, an operator will ask which emergency service is needed. If you cannot talk you can press 55 instead
  - this will tell your local police force there is an emergency.
- Refuge: For women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Call 24/7 freephone 0808 2000 247 or visit [www.refuge.org.uk](http://www.refuge.org.uk).
- Respect: For men experiencing domestic abuse. Call freephone 0808 8010327 Monday to Friday (9am – 5pm Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays; 9am – 8pm Mondays and Wednesdays). The call will not appear on the bill.

Below are links to other websites for more advice on managing relationships:

### Maggie's

'Personal relationships and cancer'  
<https://www.maggies.org/cancer-support/managing-socially/personal-relationships-and-cancer/>

### Macmillan

'Relationships'  
<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/treatment/coping-with-treatment/relationships>

### Macmillan

'Sex and cancer'  
<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/cancer-information-and-support/impacts-of-cancer/sex-and-cancer>

### Macmillan

'The Emerging Picture: LGBT People With Cancer'  
[https://www.macmillan.org.uk/\\_images/lgbt-people-with-cancer\\_tcm9-282785.pdf](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/_images/lgbt-people-with-cancer_tcm9-282785.pdf)

### Cancer Network

'Trans People and Cancer'  
[https://cancer-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Trans\\_people\\_and\\_cancer.pdf](https://cancer-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Trans_people_and_cancer.pdf)

### Sex With Cancer

<https://www.sexwithcancer.com/>

### College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists

'Cancer, sex and relationships'  
<https://www.cosrt.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Cancer-Sex-and-Relationships.pdf>

The Royal Marsden's Adult Psychological Support Service offers short-term, cancer-specific psychological support. This includes psycho-sexual therapy and couples counselling. You can either self-refer or ask somebody in your Royal Marsden healthcare team to refer you. We can provide psychological support to people up to two years following their active cancer treatment.

For more information, visit this website  
<https://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk/your-care/adult-support-services/adult-psychological-support-service>

**Alternatively, contact us directly on  
 020 7808 2777 (Chelsea) or  
 020 8661 3006 (Sutton).**

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Details of the references used in writing this booklet are available on request from:

The Royal Marsden Help Centre  
Freephone: 0800 783 7176  
Email: [patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk](mailto:patientcentre@rmh.nhs.uk)

The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust  
Fulham Road  
London SW3 6JJ

[www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk](http://www.royalmarsden.nhs.uk)

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