

ENLIST SUPPORT FROM TRUSTED FRIEND, LOVED ONE OR COLLEAGUE

- Ask someone you trust to help field questions or act as a 'shield'.
- Use group messages or email to share updates, set boundaries and ask for help. Accepting help can be hard and takes practice. See ideas others have shared on "Accepting and Managing Offers of Support" resource at headwayhealth.com.au.

TAKE CONTROL

- It's not uncommon for people to avoid talking about your health - or even avoid you - out of discomfort or not knowing what to say. It's common to feel disappointed or hurt by those from whom you expected support, while others lean in and show genuine kindness.
- Relationships may shift, and you may choose to let some go, or take the lead in reconnecting. Try: "Gosh, I haven't seen you for ages - you may have heard I've been unwell...", or "It seems like a long time ago now, but I've been away due to my health. I'm OK and looking forward to hearing your news."
- If you'd prefer not to talk about it, try "I find it helpful not to focus on it now...", or "Please don't feel the need to ask about my health - I'll let you know if anything changes." You may decide to not focus on it at work or at some social activities, so if someone brings it up, try: "Thanks for thinking of me" or "Let's chat when the kids aren't around..." and only catch up with who you want.
- It's also OK to make your excuses - step away, go to the bathroom, or catch up with someone else. Remember you don't have to talk about your health or share details - it's insensitive for others to probe.



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HAVE AN EXIT STRATEGY

- Plan activities for when you have the most energy.
- Consider arriving early so you can choose your seat - or make a quick exit. If possible use your own transport so you can leave when ready, or meet outside your home so you don't have to prise someone off your sofa!
- If you hit your limit early, have a Plan B - it's OK to apologise and leave - those who care will understand.

"So, how are you really?" Handling cancer in social situations

Cancer can be a very distressing and overwhelming experience - not only for the person receiving a diagnosis, but also for family and friends. In addition to processing the news, there is often a ripple effect across many areas of life: navigating new emotions and fears, organising medical appointments, and coping with considerable disruption to your daily routines and future plans.

Many people find managing social situations can be a new and unwanted challenge. You may need to communicate upsetting information, and it can be difficult to decide what to share, when, and with whom - especially when it comes to talking with children, elderly relatives, loved ones overseas, work colleagues, or your wider social network.

You may find that those around you don't know what to say or do - or you end up supporting them to make them feel better. Your health is personal and you may choose to share only limited information - or none at all - it is entirely up to you.

Being prepared for others' responses such as intrusive questions, unsolicited advice, or emotional reactions - can help you prepare and maintain a sense of control. You may worry about seeing others or re-engaging in past activities, and there may be no rush to do this. It's important to do what feels comfortable for you - there are no 'shoulds' or rules.

Others have walked this road before, and adapting strategies others have used to suit your situation - can be helpful.

The following ideas have been shared by people who have experienced cancer themselves or supported their loved one, and may offer starting points to consider.



DISCLAIMER This information offers general suggestions only; always consult your doctor on matters that affect your health. All care was taken to ensure accuracy at the time of distribution. For urgent assistance for yourself or someone else please contact your GP, Lifeline 13 11 14 or 000.

PREPARE AHEAD

- Consider what you want others to know, and the best way to communicate at different points in your treatment. This might be in person, via email/group messages/social media, or asking someone else to take this role.
- Think ahead about who you might see when going out, and prepare possible approaches or responses - whether returning to work, attending group activities, or encountering someone unexpectedly at the supermarket.
- Many people find that "everyone wants to see them" - even those they haven't heard from in years, which can feel overwhelming and too much. Please be assertive about what works for you.
- You might choose to delay catch-ups, group people together, or let others know: "The doctors have said I need to focus on resting between treatments for now."
- People can sometimes find they use all their energy catching up with acquaintances, leaving little for themselves or the important people in their lives.
- If people do visit, consider suggesting a 10-minute drop-in (which often means visitors stay around 30 minutes, rather than all day!); say: "The doctors have said only short visits, please" - and ask family to help reinforce this message.



MONITOR YOUR WELLBEING

- Start small when going out and monitor your fatigue so you can leave before your 'energy tank' is empty. Watch for your signs of tiredness or stress - shortness of breath, tense shoulders, racing thoughts - and pause to slow your breath to calm your body.
- Learn simple breathing techniques you can use on the spot (see our short relaxation exercises at headwayhealth.com.au)

PREPARE A SCRIPT

- Decide what you're comfortable sharing and prepare a few lines in advance. A simple "Today's a good day, thank you for asking" may be enough.
- If you're comfortable acknowledging your situation but want to move on, try: "Yes, I've got six months of treatment - it's tough, but we're hopeful. And how are you going?"
- If you'd prefer not to talk about it, try a simple: "Thanks for thinking of me, but I'd rather not discuss it right now".
- You could use the moment to mention any help you or your family may need, for example: "The main challenge is getting the kids to their evening activities..." (and pause!) "...I was wondering if anyone might be able to help out?"

"HOW ON EARTH DO I RESPOND TO THAT?" When you're going through cancer treatment, people often don't know what to say - or say things that aren't helpful. We know most mean well, but comments and questions can feel upsetting or just exhausting. Preparing a few phrases and strategies can provide a sense of control and make us less inclined to avoid situations.

"You're so strong/inspirational" We typically dislike pity and these comments can feel like pressure, feel patronising, or dismissive. All emotions are to be expected - we are human, and this is a tough time. If you're caught off guard, move the conversation on or try humour: "Well I'm still here!"

"But how are you really?" This may feel intrusive, especially if you already feel fragile. Use your script: keep it short and shift the topic. Loved ones may need support so you could say: "Day at a time, but my partner could really use a break...". Personal questions like "Did they get it all?" or "Will it come back?" - especially in public or around children are hard, so be a 'broken record': "Thanks, but I'm trying not to focus on it...". Comments about appearance, even compliments, can also feel uncomfortable, so move the conversation on.

Unsolicited advice. "You should juice... read this book... see this doctor..." can be unsettling. If it's not helpful, try: "Thanks, I'm really happy with my care team", "I'm sticking with my doctor's advice", or just: "Thanks" - as you quietly bin the book or supplements! If questions arise, jot them down for your doctors or call the Cancer Council Helpline: 13 11 20.

Cancer talk and stories - all the time. You may feel your life is being taken over by these conversations so let friends know you value distraction and normal chat: "Sorry, can I stop you there - I'm trying not to focus on this right now." If others ask you to support someone who is newly diagnosed, it's OK to decline and suggest trained peer support workers or professionals (eg. HeadwayHealth, hospital social workers, Cancer Council). You don't need to "give back" or attend every fundraiser.

"Just be positive!" This can feel like extra pressure: there's no evidence staying upbeat improves outcomes and can make you feel like you're failing if you're not always cheerful - especially when unwell or unable to do things that usually bring joy. Emotions aren't good or bad - they're real responses to real life. Please let your care team know if you're feeling low, anxious, or hopeless as evidence-based support (psychological or medical) can help, and reach out early.

Minimising your experience or expecting gratitude. Comments like "You're lucky you didn't need chemo" or "What are you going to do now it's over?" can feel dismissive. Only you get to decide what this experience means; gratitude and growth may come later - or not at all.

"It's all behind you now" Recovery is rarely linear, and there may be long-term side effects, uncertainty, and losses to grieve. Others may want you to move on, but adjustment may take some time. It may be more about finding your "new normal" - building your new life around the experience rather than "getting over it".