

# Telling other people about your diagnosis



## **This information sheet offers suggestions about telling friends, family/whānau about your cancer diagnosis.**

**Find a quiet time and a quiet place where you will not be interrupted.** Turn off distractions such as the TV and phone.

**Introduce the topic.** Try saying something like: “I’d like to have a conversation about what is going on at the moment with my health. Is that okay?”

**Some people may have a sense of what is going on already.** Check in with what they know about the situation before giving more information. For example, “You might know some of this already, so why don’t you tell me what you make of the situation so far, and then I’ll take it from there”.

**Give small amounts of information at a time, a few sentences at a time, and ask your friend if they understand what you’re saying before you continue.** You can say any of several phrases for that purpose, such as “Do you see what I mean?”, “Do you follow me?”, “Is this making sense?” or “Let me know if there is anything you want me to clarify”.

**There may often be silences, but don’t be put off by them.** You or your friend may find that just being together in the same room without talking is OK. It’s common to feel uncomfortable with silences, remember sometimes people need a moment to process what you are saying.

**When you tell someone close to you about your diagnosis, they may feel distressed by the information that you are telling them.** You may, therefore, feel that you need to be positive and upbeat in order to make your friend feel better. You might feel that you need to hide the facts from your friend so you don’t upset them; however, it’s helpful to be open about your feelings so that they have a good understanding.

Be prepared for people’s responses, provide clear and honest information and let them know what kind of support you need if this is appropriate. Often times our friends would like to provide support but are unsure how.

## **Responding to people’s reactions**

People can react very differently when hearing distressing news. Some might withdraw and others may become closer. Even if you are the person with cancer, you may have more difficulty dealing with your friend’s emotions than your own. Your friend might stay away from you rather than face the fact that they have strong emotions but don’t know how to deal with them. Here are some suggestions for helping both of you.

**Always try to acknowledge your friend’s feelings.** You might say something like, “You look as if you’re feeling really uneasy when I talk about the cancer,” or “I can understand if hearing this information makes you upset.” In an ideal world, of course, this wouldn’t be necessary. Your friend would be able to explain what they are feeling and then bring the focus 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,** for example, “This is making both of us feel upset,” or “I know you might feel anxious or scared about what’s going to happen next, and so am I.” The more you are aware of your own feelings and the other person’s, the better the conversation will be.

## **You and your family**

When you are diagnosed with cancer, it can be both a shock and a challenge for you. You may feel alone at times. Connections with other people who care about you and try to understand your situation can help you to overcome this feeling. Support from family and friends can be a great help to you while you cope with cancer.

Health professionals support this process by encouraging families to learn about cancer and how they can help their family member. Support from others has a positive impact on a person with cancer.

After a diagnosis of cancer, roles within the family can change. People may be afraid to say things to

each other in the same way as they did before. The way your family works may be affected, such as when family members are unable to work or take responsibility for things they did before or since their diagnosis.

Family therapy and working with a psychologist or counsellor can provide education and support to help you work together.

## Some suggestions for helping families and people with cancer

**Know your limits.** No one can do everything. If you expect to do everything, you may find yourself frustrated, disappointed and exhausted. Knowing your limits helps you put your energies to things that are most important.

**Communicate.** Each family communicates in their own way. It's important to communicate how you are doing to your family. When you talk with your family members be honest and specific about what concerns you.

Communication is not always expressed in words. Your actions can communicate your feelings as well. Sometimes just being there can be a form of communication and support.

**Knowing more about what's going on can be helpful.** Let your medical team know how much information you want. Contact your local Cancer Society for good-quality resources or call the support staff on the Cancer Information Helpline **0800 CANCER (226 237)**.

## Suggested reading

The following Cancer Society resources offer practical tips to help you talk about your cancer diagnosis. They are available through your local Cancer Society or on our website: [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)

- Cancer in the Family: Talking to your children
- Coping with cancer: Your guide to support and practical help
- Emotions and Cancer: A guide for people with cancer, their families/whanau and friends
- Supporting young adult children when you have cancer

## Sources of support

Some people can become overwhelmed by their cancer. Seeking support and information can help.

Here are some suggestions:

- talk with family and friends
- contact the Cancer Information Helpline on **0800 CANCER (226 237)**
- seek peer support through Cancer Connect (available through the Cancer Society.)
- visit your local Cancer Society library
- talk to health professionals working with you
- see if support groups are available in your area
- talk to your GP about emotional support from the hospital, workplace or Cancer Society.