

## Life after treatment

### Will things ever be the same?

Women often find that once their treatment has been completed they feel down in the dumps. This often comes as a surprise. You can't wait for the end of treatment. You expect that you will feel so relieved when this particular ordeal is over, that everything will feel good.

There are a number of reasons why you may not feel as elated as you expected.

- You will probably have quite a lot more time on your hands now that you're not chasing off to doctors' appointments and treatments. Of course you've been looking forward to this. However, while you were spending so much time undergoing your treatment, you didn't have as much time to think. Having more time on your hands gives you more time to begin to worry about things you may have put on hold while you were undergoing your treatment.
- While you were undergoing your treatment, you were meeting lots of people. In the hospital and during your treatment, you may have become friendly with other women going through similar procedures. Once their treatment is over, many women miss that companionship. They can feel very alone.
- While your cancer was being actively treated, you probably felt reassured. The cancer was being monitored. When your active treatment has finished you may be told to come back for review in a couple of months, or even longer than that. Given that the cancer first grew without you being aware that it was growing, it is understandable that without continuing monitoring and reassurance, you will feel worried that the cancer will recur or spread.
- As you come to the end of your treatment, your family and friends are likely to be expecting you to feel better. They will certainly want you to feel

better. However, although you may be physically more able, you are likely to continue to feel overwhelmed, fragile, and vulnerable, for quite some time. Let them know that this is how you feel, and that you still need their support.

- When your treatment ends, your family and friends will be hoping that life will "return to normal". However, many women find that for as long as there is an ongoing threat that the cancer might return or spread, having been diagnosed with cancer changes how they think and feel. As they become "well" again, they may resume many activities they previously enjoyed, but life does not "return to normal". Priorities will have changed. Things that were important before may no longer seem as important now. Having things "return to normal" may be a goal, but it may not be as simple as it appears to others. Try to talk to your family and friends about the changes you want to make in your life. Let them know how you are feeling. Most importantly, don't feel pressured into "returning to normal" just to suit others. Adjusting to life after treatment will take time.

### **Trying to "stay positive"**

There is tremendous pressure on anyone diagnosed with cancer to "stay positive". Books, magazines and television programmes often seem to suggest that you can beat cancer with positive thinking. Being optimistic is certainly a happier state of mind to be in than expecting the worst. However, the pressure to keep positive can also have some negative effects.

If you put too much pressure on yourself to stay positive 100% of the time, you may end up feeling guilty when you're having a bad day. If you're not showing consistent improvement, you may fear that it's somehow your own fault because you're not fighting hard enough. Sometimes family and friends believe they are helping you by encouraging you to keep positive, put it all behind you, not think about it. However, not being able to talk about your real feelings and concerns

denies you the opportunity to face and overcome your fears. It can lead to you feeling alone and unsupported.

People often mistakenly believe that keeping positive and being strong means being cheerful all the time. Never having fears or doubts. Never talking about worst-case scenarios. If your family and friends are pressuring you to be positive, or if you are pressuring yourself to stay positive, then think about this.

- Being positive in the face of cancer means intending to live as well as you can for as long as you can.
- Being positive in the face of cancer means facing your fears.
- Being positive in the face of cancer means recognising that some days will be harder than others.
- Being positive in the face of cancer means being open to change.
- Being positive in the face of cancer means recognising what is within your power to change, and what is not.
- Being positive in the face of cancer means living in the present, enjoying the here and now.
- Being positive in the face of cancer means being realistic, addressing worst-case scenarios, so you can put them aside. Then, however long you may have to live, you can get on with living well.