Never Alone: How to Leverage Your Support Network While Going Through Cancer Treatment

by ALISON RICHARDS

The Cancer Support Community

When you receive a cancer diagnosis, it is one of the scariest moments of your life. Hopefully you will have a loved-one with you, or a good friend, as you will need a cancer support community while you navigate the weeks, months or years of treatment. Having cancer is the ultimate rollercoaster, and without such support, you will struggle emotionally, physically and financially.

Family and Friends

If you have close family or friends, then they will hopefully be your immediate support network (assuming you choose to share your diagnosis with them). Having someone in your home to help you with everyday tasks when you are feeling ill is enormously helpful.

If friends can provide a network to bring you food and get you your medicine, then that will help greatly.

In my experience, family and friends often feel helpless, so they are only too pleased to be able to pitch in when needed.

Support from your employer is important too, and my boss was brilliant when I had to take time off for treatment. I carried on working when I was well enough and took the odd day off when I felt sick.

Outside Support

As much as family and friends are well-meaning with their help, sometimes you need external support. One reason for this is that it is nice to speak to people who have been through the same experience that you have, and they can understand how you feel. They can offer practical advice to make sure you know all the tips. For example, making chemotherapy go as smoothly as possible.

Another reason to talk to someone outside your close circle is that they are not emotionally involved with you and can offer a more objective viewpoint. They can stick to the facts rather than letting their feelings influence the advice they offer.

You may need financial support and there are cancer support organizations who can advise you how to claim benefits or receive a grant if you need help with your bills. Many people cannot work during cancer treatment, so this can be a stressful time if you cannot replace that income.

Your Medical Team

When you have been diagnosed with cancer, your doctor will hopefully offer leaflets and booklets that include places you can go to for support.

In the U.K., Macmillan nurses are assigned to patients, and my own breast care nurse was always on the end of the phone or an email if I had any questions. These nurses are absolute superstars and are incredibly caring and knowledgeable.

Many hospitals have Macmillan centers, places where you can go for information, or even a cup of tea. They are a nice place to go where you do not feel out of place in a wig or scarf, because everybody is in the same boat.

Many organizations like Macmillan provide leaflets on all aspects of having cancer, including the financial implications. They will direct you to helplines and other organizations where you can speak with experts for advice.

Charities

There are hundreds of cancer charities, such as Breast Cancer Now, American Cancer Fund, the Teenage Cancer Trust, Bowel Cancer UK and many more.

Although some cover all cancers, most specific cancers have their own charities that can be particularly useful for finding specialist information or fellow patients. They offer a wealth of knowledge and often provide helplines where you can speak to someone and ask questions. They can put you in touch with local support groups too, if you would like to meet up with others in your situation.

Podcasts

When I was diagnosed with cancer I was recommended to listen to the You, Me And The Big C podcast. It was hosted initially by three ladies who have been treated for cancer; tragically Rachel Bland died in 2018. Her husband Steve took up the reins and joined Lauren and Deborah in the studio for their chats about a wide range of subjects around the disease. The podcast will resonate with anyone who has received a cancer diagnosis, but particularly for younger people with the disease, as those under 40 are often under-represented in such discussions.

Listening to this podcast really helped me; it made me laugh and cry in equal measure. The girls find humor in this darkest of subjects, something that many who do not have the disease would not understand.

The CDC has a range of cancer-related podcasts too, featuring interviews with experts and patients who have expertise in many different cancers. They discuss how to prevent cancer, what the impact of COVID-19 is on those going through treatment and what the trends are in screening for the disease.

Social Media

Social media can be a source of huge comfort for those seeking a cancer support community. There are Facebook groups for just about every type of cancer, allowing you to ask questions and read stories from people in your position.

I joined a group of ladies with breast cancer and was able to ask about all sorts of things, from the best cream to use during radiotherapy to the wait time for reconstructive surgery. The bad times are shared too, and you have a virtual shoulder to cry on if you need one.

Twitter Cancer Support Groups

Twitter is also a great place for finding others in your situation. It’s easy to look for certain hashtags like #breastcancer or #bowelcancer. There are bloggers and other writers and experts who you can follow and read their articles.

You will probably connect with other people who are in the same boat as you too. A lady who I connected with started a WhatsApp group for others going through treatment and it was a nice, small bunch of people who could share their experiences.

There are Twitter accounts for all the major cancer websites too, such as the American Cancer Society and Cancer Research UK.

Instagram Cancer Support Groups

Instagram is also a place for inspiration and support. Searching the hashtags for your particular type of cancer will provide plenty of accounts that you can follow. I love Instagram myself, as it is often more uplifting than Facebook and Twitter, with people posting nice images and offering positive advice.

Blogs

Many people write blogs about their experiences with cancer, which is a useful outlet, but it also provides great information for those going through the same thing.

I did this myself and so many people have got in touch with me, asking questions and offering advice. The blogging cancer support community is extremely supportive and helpful.

Get the Support You Want, When You Want It

The support you want will change as you navigate your cancer journey. The ideas above will hopefully give you plenty of options about whether you would like face-to-face support or groups you can access online. There are a huge number of people who are keen for you to tap into their vast knowledge and share their experiences to help you with yours.