

Family Communication During a Cancer Diagnosis



A cancer diagnosis can bring daunting emotional and practical challenges – not just for the individual, but for the entire family. Sharing this news with loved ones may feel overwhelming, and the need for additional support may highlight complex family dynamics. For some, this support may come naturally; for others, it can be more difficult to ask for or provide.

Every family is unique. While some may come together easily during times of crisis, others may face emotional hurdles or communication barriers. Finding the right approach to communicate openly and effectively with your family can help reduce stress and build a stronger support network during this time.

There's no single "right" way to talk with family about cancer. The most important thing is to find what feels genuine and sustainable for you. Giving yourself and your family time, space, and grace can help everyone move forward with more understanding and connection.

If you are feeling unsure how to communicate with family, or find it difficult, here are some general suggestions to support communication within your family.



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General suggestions to support communication within your family.

1. Communicate in a way that feels right for you

Choose the style that feels most comfortable for you. If face-to-face conversations are too difficult, consider using other forms of communication – like text messages, emails, or written notes – to gently introduce the topic.

2. Introduce the diagnosis gradually

- Talking about cancer can be emotionally overwhelming. Taking a gradual approach may help you gather your thoughts and feel more in control. You might start with:
- “I haven’t been feeling well lately. I’ve had some tests, and my doctor has explained the results to me...”
- “I need to tell you something that’s hard to talk about. Can we set aside some time to talk together?”

3. Practice what you want to say

Preparing ahead of time can help ease anxiety. Consider writing down your thoughts, feelings, and the facts you want to share. This can provide clarity and confidence when the time comes to talk.



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4. Be honest and stick to the facts

Honest communication can reduce confusion or misinterpretation. Sharing how you feel and what you currently know – without overwhelming yourself or your family with too much at once – can lead to more supportive, open dialogue.

5. Allow communication to help you process emotions

Talking can help you make sense of your own feelings. Having someone listen may bring comfort and lessen the sense of isolation that can sometimes accompany a diagnosis.

6. Use non-verbal communication

Words aren't always necessary. A facial expression, a hug, or a simple gesture can convey support and love when speaking feels too hard.

7. Ask for help with communication

Family dynamics can be complicated and ingrained. If speaking directly with some relatives feels too difficult, consider asking a trusted family member or friend to help share the news on your behalf or keep others updated when you don't feel like talking.

8. Be patient – with yourself and your family

A diagnosis may disrupt usual roles and routines within a family system. It's normal for stress levels and family conflict to increase. Remind one another that these changes are part of adjusting to a new reality, and that emotional reactions and coping skills may differ across family members.



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9. Keep your family informed

Keeping everyone updated – at a level that feels comfortable for you – can reduce uncertainty and promote a sense of shared understanding. Assigning small tasks early on can also help your loved ones feel involved and build a sense of routine.

10. Consider a family meeting

If the situation becomes emotionally complex, a family meeting in a neutral and safe environment can help. Professionals, such as social workers, counsellors, or psychologists can help facilitate these conversations and ensure that all voices are heard with compassion.



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Understanding Scanxiety



What is Scanxiety?

Scanxiety refers to the nervousness, dread, or anxiety that many people experience before, during, and after medical scans or tests. This feeling can be tied to the uncertainty of results, fear of health changes, and the process itself.

Scanxiety is a real and common experience for many individuals undergoing medical scans or tests, especially for those dealing with serious health conditions. By recognising the signs, reaching out for support, and using coping strategies, you can manage scanxiety and ease the emotional strain that accompanies the process.

Is Scanxiety the same as Anxiety?

Scanxiety is a specific form of anxiety related to medical scans, particularly for people undergoing treatments for cancer or other serious conditions. While it shares common features with generalised anxiety, scanxiety is often triggered by upcoming scans, tests, or waiting for results, making it more context specific.

What triggers Scanxiety?

- **Trauma and shock of a diagnosis:** The emotional aftermath of receiving a serious diagnosis can create lasting anxiety.
- **Fear of cancer progression or return:** Worrying that the disease has returned or worsened can cause significant distress.
- **Changes in treatment plan:** Alterations in your usual treatment may cause feelings of uncertainty or fear.
- **Physical discomfort and confinement:** Some scans may be uncomfortable or cause feelings of claustrophobia, adding to anxiety.



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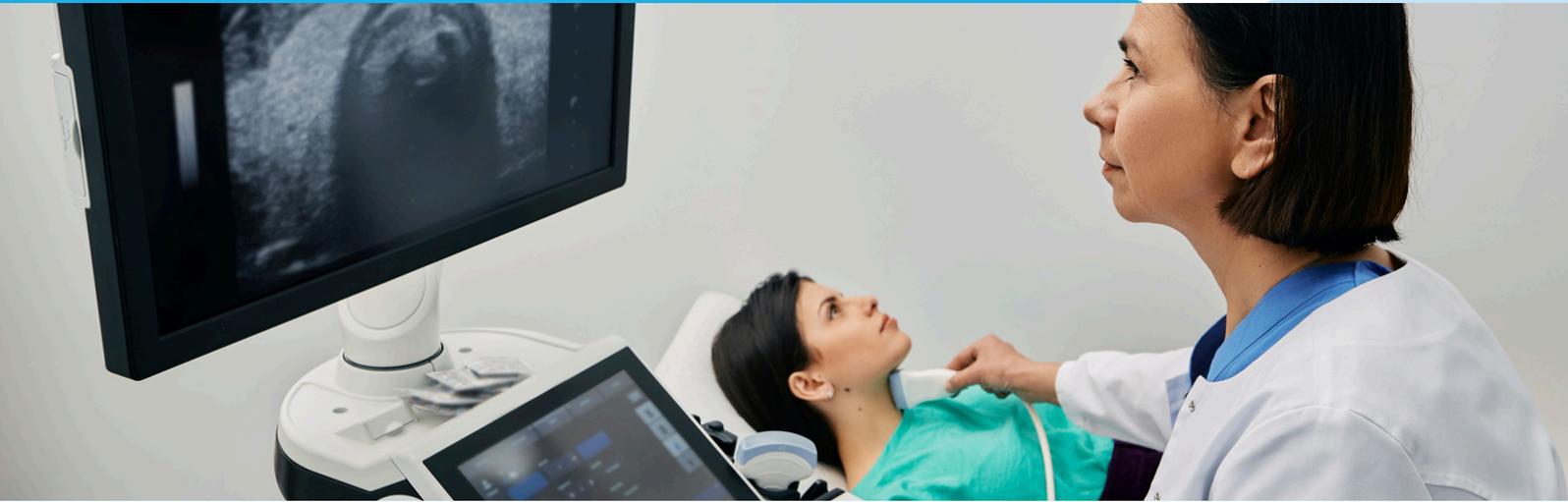


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How to manage scanxiety

Scanxiety varies for each person, but here are some general strategies that may help:

1. Lead-up to the scan

- **Recognise scanxiety:** Identify the physical and emotional signs of anxiety so you can address it.
- **Label it:** Acknowledge your feelings as "scanxiety" to normalise the experience.
- **Connect with supportive people:** Spend time with family, friends, or colleagues who make you feel safe and comforted.
- **Maintain a healthy lifestyle:**
 - Regular exercise and relaxation techniques like meditation can help reduce stress.
 - Keep a balanced diet, avoiding too much sugar or caffeine, which may worsen anxiety.
- **Prepare information:** Ensure you have all necessary documents and details about the scan, such as referral letters or instructions.
- **Choose morning appointments:** Whenever possible, request morning scans to avoid delays.



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How to manage scanxiety

2. During the Scan

- **Bring a support person:** A friend, family member, or support group can provide comfort.
- **Distraction techniques:** Try to occupy your mind by listing things you enjoy or focusing on trivia, like birthdays.
- **Breathing and Mindfulness:** Practice deep breathing, meditation, and mindfulness exercises to stay calm. A counsellor can work with you ahead of time to help you develop these skills.
- **Communicate with the technician:** Let the technician or nurse know if you are feeling anxious. They may offer support or medication if needed.

3. Waiting for Results

- **Stay engaged in joyful activities:** Keep yourself busy with activities that bring you happiness.
- **Talk to support people:** Lean on your support network, whether family, friends, or a support group.
- **Meditation and relaxation:** Continue using techniques that help you manage stress.
- **Help others:** Doing something kind for others can distract from your own worries and foster a sense of purpose.
- **Positive self-talk:** Remind yourself of your resilience. You have the strength to cope with whatever comes your way.



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Tolerating Uncertainty



What is uncertainty?

Uncertainty is a common and often ongoing concern for people living with cancer, as well as for their families and support networks. It can arise at any point in the cancer journey—before a diagnosis, during treatment, or even after recovery.

You might face uncertainty about scan results, the possibility of recurrence, side effects of treatment, or the future of your health, relationships, career, and overall well-being.

Uncertainty can be distressing, particularly when it feels overwhelming or constant. However, learning to tolerate and manage uncertainty is possible, and it can reduce emotional distress.

Understanding the emotional impact

Living with cancer brings a wide range of emotions. There will be good days – when you feel strong, hopeful, or connected – and there will be difficult days, marked by fear, sadness, or exhaustion. These emotional shifts are a natural response to your experience.

Recognising and accepting your emotions, rather than judging or avoiding them, is an important part of learning to cope. On the harder days, having supportive strategies in place can help you manage the discomfort of not knowing what comes next.



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Tolerating Uncertainty



Supportive strategies to consider

Each person copes differently with uncertainty. The key is to identify what helps you feel more grounded, even in times of unpredictability. Here are some practical strategies to consider and explore:

1. Express your thoughts and emotions

Writing down your thoughts, feelings, and fears can help you process what you're going through. Journaling doesn't need to be polished or daily – just honest.

Try noting:

- Positive reflections: "Today I felt more energetic and spent time outside."
- Difficult moments: "I had trouble sleeping and felt anxious in the morning."
- Next steps: "I'll make a list of questions for my next appointment."

Putting your feelings into words can offer relief, provide clarity, and help prepare for conversations with loved ones or your care team.

2. Engage in creative expression

If writing isn't your preferred outlet, explore other creative avenues. Drawing, painting, music, gardening, photography or crafting can help release emotions in a nonverbal and often soothing way. Creativity can also provide a sense of purpose and joy, even in small doses.



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Supportive strategies to consider

3. Self soothe

Soothing activities can calm your nervous system and bring moments of peace. This might include:

- Drinking a warm cup of tea
- Wrapping yourself in a soft blanket
- Listening to calming music
- Sitting in your favourite chair
- Taking a warm bath

These comforting actions are intended as temporary relief from uncertainty. They may make the experience more bearable in the moment.

4. Use distraction mindfully

Sometimes, giving your mind a break from worry is helpful. Choose enjoyable or engaging distractions such as:

- Spending time with a pet or loved one
- Watching a movie or reading a book
- Listening to a podcast or music
- Engaging in a hobby or light exercise

Distraction can be a healthy, temporary coping tool – but be mindful not to use it to avoid your feelings altogether. Balance it with time for reflection or emotional expression.



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Seeking additional support

If you find uncertainty is consistently overwhelming or interfering with your daily life, consider speaking with a counsellor, psychologist, or other mental health professional. They can help you:

- Develop personalised coping strategies
- Learn problem-solving skills
- Work through specific anxieties or fears

Joining a support group or connecting with others who understand what you're going through can also provide validation and comfort.

Tolerating uncertainty doesn't mean liking it or pretending it doesn't affect you. It means learning how to live with the reality of the unknown, while still finding ways to care for yourself and engage with life. Some days will be harder than others – but with the right support and tools, you can navigate those days with greater resilience and self-compassion.



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