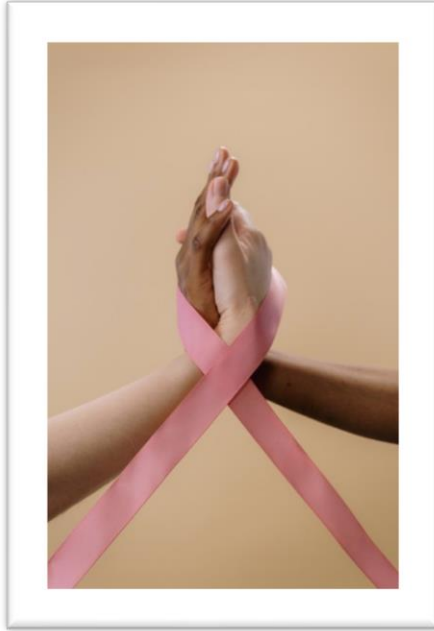


## A LOVED ONE HAS BEEN DIAGNOSED



### **Cancer for dummies: “I need answers!”**

A book series ‘for dummies’ exists – these books aim to explain complex concepts using simple and easily understandable language. When faced with a loved one's battle against cancer, you often wish for a book like that. This is because you may frequently feel helpless and uncertain due to unfamiliar terminology and how to react. If only there were a guide that could provide clear instructions on what to do and what not to do.

However, the unfortunate reality is that no matter how comprehensive such a book may be, it can never fully capture the unique journey of a cancer patient. No book can offer all the answers. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean you have to navigate this journey without information.

## It's your journey but it's not your journey

Some people choose not to share with loved ones or acquaintances that they've undergone a biopsy. It's their right to choose how they want to approach this journey – who and when they invite to walk with them. There are fewer 'do's' and 'don'ts' on this journey than you might anticipate. The rules also vary from person to person.

- Be open to listening to what the diagnosed person needs.
- Pay attention to your own emotions and what you require. The ground has been pulled out from under your feet as well. You might be left with worries and scenarios about what could happen.
- You may feel that it is selfish to share your feelings too. Take a moment; breathe; notice the tension in your body and the worries in your own heart and mind. Consider speaking to a therapist.
- Choose moments to share your fears and concerns with your loved one. Learn how to communicate effectively during this time and communicate what you need.
- Also, allow others to care for you, support you, and pray for you.

## Search engines

Be careful to believe everything you read online. During the waiting period for a diagnosis, we often turn to Dr Google to find out answers. We do this because we cannot necessarily listen to and ask questions ourselves in the consulting room. Some questions are also easier to search on a search engine than to say them out loud.

The journey varies for each patient, and a search engine can never match the expertise of an oncologist (a cancer doctor). If you can't stop yourself from using search engines, don't send everything you read to your loved one who is almost, possibly or has just been

diagnosed with cancer. They should hear news and explanations directly from their doctor.

### Trust this process

Few things are as distressing as feeling out of control. As a family member or friend, you cannot take control in this situation, nor should you attempt to.

- Your role is one of support, attentive listening, and presence.
- Place your trust in the medical process and the recommendations of the doctors. Continuously questioning the doctor's advice may undermine the patient's trust and sense of security.
- It's acceptable to have medical knowledge and consider seeking a second opinion but remember that you are not the patient's doctor.

### Insecurity

After hearing the diagnosis, take a moment to process it. You and your loved one will likely have many questions, and depending on where they are in the process, they will be able to convey more or less information. Nonetheless, uncertainty is a constant throughout this journey. This uncertainty doesn't stem from a lack of expertise on the doctor's part or from a lack of compassion on their side; it arises from the inherent uncertainty that cancer brings.

You are going to meet people on this journey who speak with great certainty from first-hand experience or that of a friend or family member. Sometimes this advice is comforting, sometimes it is not. Remember that everyone's body reacts differently to treatment. Survival outcomes can differ even if they see the same doctor, receive the same treatment, and share the same faith.

## How do I talk about God and cancer?

Cancer is marked by its uncertainty. It challenges both society and the gospel which often emphasises certainty. It is in times of a diagnosis, difficult treatment, or possible death that we want to reach for something that can ground us – certainty. We want to understand God and we want to understand this suffering.

Some people find comfort in the idea that God might have caused it. If God brought the cancer upon them, it must be to bring something great out of it – some sort of testimony through your life and healing. An alternative view is that cancer is just part of life. That diseases – like cancer – are part of the broken world we are part of. It is what it is and there aren't necessarily concealed reasons for it.

*Does this mean that God has no part in this cancer journey?*

No, God is with us in the ups and downs of life; in the birth of a child, and the death of a loved one. God does not give cancer to test people or to look good. God can certainly use us through the way we live as disciples; in the way we testify to our awareness of God's presence amid uncertainty. *This* is the testimony during cancer.

Your role as a loved one is to stand alongside the cancer patient wherever they find themselves, respecting their spiritual journey too. When it comes to cancer patients, try listening to how they think about God's role in this journey. If their perception of God's role in their situation is causing them distress, express your empathy, support them, and remind them of God's love. Do not disregard your own beliefs about God's involvement, but also remember that a cancer patient is navigating a diagnosis while also undergoing their spiritual growth and exploration.

## Cancer as identity

Although your loved one is now a cancer patient, they are still the person you once knew and loved. They will start to look different, and you are going to notice the deterioration much more than they do themselves. Try not to bring attention to the physical all the time. Your loved one is more than their body. Look into their eyes, affirm their dignity, and allow them to continue doing what they can do.

You are more than the loved one of a cancer patient too. Stay alive, keep doing what you enjoy, and create spaces to be able to breathe and come out. You are not letting him or her down, forgetting or neglecting them. May you be aware in this extremely difficult time that God is also with you. You are also God's.

You might find yourself sending up prayers even when feelings of anger towards God arise. Be gentle with yourself and your faith journey. Be aware of your 'shooting prayers' and that they testify to what and in whom you believe.

We believe in the Triune God: the creator, nurturer, and comforter.

God is with you, too.

If you or a loved one has cancer, contact Cansa, Hospice, or established organisations.

Cansa: <https://cansa.org.za> or 0800 22 66 22

Cancer Alliance: <https://canceralliance.co.za>

Hospice: <https://hpca.co.za>



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