

Coping with Cancer at Christmas

Information for people affected by cancer

The holiday season can be difficult for people who have experienced a major change or loss in their life. Feelings of loneliness, isolation and sadness are common and holiday traditions can be painful reminders of how life has changed.

Kate Aigner, Cancer Information Consultant at Cancer Council ACT, said she receives many calls on the 13 11 20 line from people affected by cancer during the holiday season. “This can be a very difficult time for people affected by cancer.”

“We speak to people who are fearful that this may be their last holiday season. Others may be worried that their feelings and emotions may dampen the celebrations for others or that they may experience frustrating delays in appointments, treatments and results over this period.”

Kate said family and friends, finding it a lonely and sad time of the year without a loved one, also called to seek support.

“We are here to listen to people’s cancer experiences and share emotional and practical support to help them cope with the challenges or feelings of sadness that they may be facing.”

Kate encourages anyone finding it difficult to cope with cancer to call Cancer Council 13 11 20 to speak to a cancer health professional.

Tips for coping over the Christmas period

Sharing experiences and coping strategies can help people get through difficult times.

Cancer Council spoke to people affected by cancer

and their family and friends, as well as people coping with the loss of a loved one to find out how they coped with the Christmas period.

Following are some of their suggestions:

Set realistic expectations

- If gift giving is part of your celebrations, consider online shopping and/or gift vouchers for presents. This can save both time and energy.
- If you are experiencing financial issues, consider ‘Kris Kringle’ or making home-made gift vouchers for things such as babysitting, gardening or a picnic.
- Consider not hosting holiday celebrations. Ask another family member or friend to be the host, book a restaurant or arrange a picnic instead.
- If you are having treatment over the holiday season, consider having low key celebrations and plan a celebration at the end of treatment.

Express your needs

- Tell others if you are finding it difficult to cope and accept offers of help. Be specific about things people can do to assist like help with cooking, shopping or travel to appointments.
- Practice being assertive and remember that you don’t have to do anything that you don’t want to, especially if you’re not feeling up to it.

Be gentle with yourself

- Give yourself permission to get through the holiday season the best way you can. Try to accept any limitations and remember celebrations do not have to be perfect.
- Mood swings and feelings of loss are common over the season. Allow yourself some time to grieve and reflect.

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- Have an exit plan prepared for times when you may find a family gathering or party overwhelming. Ask a friend to be your support if situations become overwhelming.

Keep activities simple and non-strenuous

- If you are preparing food keep it simple or if others are let them know of any dietary needs. People want their guests to enjoy the celebrations and will be happy to provide meals you will enjoy.
- Fatigue is a common side effect after cancer treatment. Avoid overwhelming numbers of visitors and long car trips. As energy levels may fluctuate, sometimes it can be helpful to plan the day's activities and then halve them.
- Allow for rest times during the holiday period and let people know that you may need to rest during celebrations or visits.

Create new rituals

- If your usual rituals or traditions no longer feel right, consider replacing them with new ones. For example, light a candle in honour of a special

person who has died and place it with a photo or flowers on the table.

Seek support

- Talking to someone about your feelings can reduce feelings of distress and isolation. Family and friends can be a good source of support.
- Our friendly and experienced cancer health professionals are here to support you; simply call **13 11 20**. They can assist you with your concerns and feelings as well as put you in touch with support services. We also recommend that you carry out of hours contacts for your treating doctor and hospital.
- Online support, including blogs and forums, is available 24 hours a day via our Cancer Council Online Community **cancercouncil.com.au/OC**. It is professionally moderated by Cancer Council staff and this will continue over the Christmas period.

