

Communicating with the people around you

Lymphoma can put pressure on your relationships. This page is for anyone affected by lymphoma, including family and friends of someone with a diagnosis. It offers tips to help you communicate well with the people around you. We have separate information about [relationships](#), [talking to children](#), and [caring for someone who has lymphoma](#).

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How effective communication can help

Living with lymphoma can bring challenges to your personal relationships. You might find that some relationships feel different, perhaps strained. When things are left unsaid, it can create an uncomfortable sense of distance and misunderstandings might arise.

Whether you are the person with the diagnosis, or you are a family member or friend, you no doubt face some difficult feelings. Tempting as it might be, try not to withdraw from those around you. It can help to let others know how you feel, even if you simply say that you are confused about how you feel.

Honest conversations give you a chance to connect with others – to understand their thoughts and feelings or why they're acting in a particular way. For example, sadness might be expressed in another form, such as anger or frustration. Talking allows an opportunity to feel understood, which can greatly benefit your emotional wellbeing and personal relationships.

Although relationships take work, research shows that people with cancer manage better when they are supported through strong relationships. The benefits include:

- [reducing stress](#)
- enhancing mental wellbeing
- encouraging you to pay attention to wider health and wellbeing needs.

How can I communicate well?

It's common to feel that there are differences in your relationships after a lymphoma diagnosis. There might be times when you feel unsure how to talk to the people close to you – both about lymphoma and about other things. There's no right or wrong way, though you might like to try some of the tips we offer below.

I found different ways to communicate that worked for me. I would often write how I felt and share it with a loved. Sometimes I found it difficult to understand how I felt so I would break down in tears.

Raveen, diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma

Be honest about how you feel

Many people are not used to talking openly about how they feel. It can be an emotional experience to do so and might feel daunting if you are not used to it. Although it's important to acknowledge your emotions, there might be times when you don't want to talk about how you're feeling – let the people close to you know when this is the case.

Recognise the effect lymphoma has had, and continues to have, on your relationships. Think also about the impact it's had on other areas of your life, which, in turn, can affect your relationships. For example, if you're no longer able to do the job you used to, you might feel more reliant on your partner financially.

Remember that how you feel might differ to how others around you feel. Even if you find someone else's reaction difficult to understand, be respectful of it. You can acknowledge it, too, for example, by saying something like: 'it sounds as though that was really frustrating for you', or 'I can see that you feel angry when...'

I am frequently being told how well I look – this is kindly meant, but can be irritating when everything is an effort and I am very tired.

Alison, diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukaemia (CLL)

Set aside some time to talk

When you feel ready, set aside some time to talk about how you're feeling. Find a time where you are free from interruptions and can really listen to each another. You might find it helps to write down the main things you'd like to say. You could start with something like: 'Although it's hard for me, it's important to tell you how I'm feeling. I'd really like to hear how you're feeling, too'.

Let people know what you'd like

Generally, people want to help, although they might not know quite how. Support can take a range of forms, practically and emotionally.

If you are the person who has lymphoma, let others know how they can help you. If you are **caring for someone who has lymphoma**, rather than assuming that you know, ask the person what they would like from you – this might include allowing them their personal space and independence.

Practical support could include:

- preparing meals
- doing household chores
- helping with childcare
- providing transport and company to and from hospital appointments
- passing on messages and updates
- organising social activities.

Not all support needs to take the form of doing things; simply 'being there' can be deeply valuable. Listening, respecting personal boundaries and finding ways to express warmth and care are all ways of giving emotional support.

Listen

The value of listening is often underestimated, particularly if you feel there is nothing you can do to 'fix' a situation. Acknowledge that you are unable to make the situation go away. Offering solutions right away can feel dismissive of feelings – take time to really listen to what the other person has to say. Be aware that feelings of sadness and loss might be expressed as anger and frustration.

- Let the person speak without interrupting or changing the subject.
- Give the person space to express how they feel rather than trying to fix or lighten the situation. You could say something like: 'that sounds really tough' or say nothing at all and to offer a hug or place your hand on their arm.

- Acknowledge the person's feelings rather than telling them to 'be positive'. Sharing fears and anxieties can help to relieve tension and bring a sense of emotional connectedness and understanding.
- Repeat back in your own words what the other person says. If you're not sure what they mean, ask. This gives you a chance to check that you've understood and can help show the other person that you're really trying to understand them.

Respect personal boundaries

Sometimes, the person with lymphoma might not want to talk about it. They might prefer to have a general conversation (or 'small talk') about everyday things like the latest TV drama or their favourite sports team. It's important to take time away from thinking about lymphoma to do something fun together, such as a shared hobby. Some people have 'non-lymphoma days', where they agree not talk about lymphoma.

If you are unsure what to talk about, share this. You could say something like: 'I want to say the right thing but in honesty, I don't know what that is'.

If you're not the person with lymphoma, be careful with giving advice. You might be keen to pass on tips, for example, about **certain foods you think might help**. Remember that each case of lymphoma is different. The medical team will give tailored advice based on the needs of the person with lymphoma.

Express warmth and care

There might be times when you feel your relationships are strained. It can help to acknowledge this, for example, by saying something like: 'I feel like things have changed but I want you to know that I care about our relationship. I often feel unsure what to say – it's as though we're both finding our way through this unfamiliarity'.

If you're away from one another, find ways to express your love and care. Send a card or email, or get in touch in other ways, such as by phone, Skype or FaceTime.

Use 'I' statements

'I' statements can be a helpful way to express yourself while lowering the risk of an angry, hurt or defensive response. 'I' statements focus on you and your feelings, as opposed to the other person's behaviours. They can help to take blame out of your communication.

Examples of 'I' statements are:

- **Statement:** 'You always get up and wash the dishes straight after dinner. Why don't you ever just sit with me for a while?'
Rephrased using 'I' statements: 'I know when you get up and wash the dishes straight after dinner you are trying to be helpful. I sometimes feel quite alone, though, and I'd really like if we could sit for a while longer, just to sit and chat together.'
- **Statement:** 'It really annoyed me yesterday when you told me to sit down and rest. You really don't understand me at all! Sometimes I just want to carry on with the everyday tasks.'
Rephrased using 'I' statements: 'I know you care and don't want me to overdo it, but I'd really like to do some of the jobs around the house. It helps me to get a sense of normality back. Please trust me to tell you when I feel tired and need to rest.'

Relate is the UK's largest provider of relationship support. Their services include counselling, workshops and online information. On their website, you can find information and tips to help with **communication** difficulties.

We have separate information about the topics in **bold font**. Please get in touch if you'd like to request copies or if you would like further information about any aspect of lymphoma. Phone 0808 808 5555 or email information@lymphoma-action.org.uk.

References

The full list of references for this page is available on our website. Alternatively, email publications@lymphoma-action.org.uk or call 01296 619409 if you would like a copy.

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