



Emma B: How is Coronavirus affecting your mental health?

[music]

Hello. I'm Emma B, and welcome to our Coronavirus series of *Talking Cancer*, a podcast from Macmillan and Boots where I talk to experts to get answers to the questions Macmillan is hearing most. Dany is back, which is great news. McMillan's strategic advisor for treatment, Dany Bell, will help offer some guidance with managing your mental health if you're living with or affected by cancer in these strange times we find ourselves living in. From recognizing the signs if you're struggling.

Dany Bell: If they're starting to feel overly anxious about things if their mood changes and they're feeling low.

Emma: To guidance to help relieve anxiety.

Dany: Actually, we live in a really connected world now and lots of people have adapted through lockdown to stay connected.

Emma: We'll also hear some advice from Carol who was diagnosed with breast cancer at the end of last year. A few months later, she found out that the cancer had spread to her bones and restarted her treatment in March this year.

Carol: I dealt with my anxiety by trying to focus on the things that I could control.

Emma: We're Macmillan, and we're talking cancer. Dany, welcome back. It's lovely to hear you and see you again. Now, like in the last episode, I'm going to timestamp this because we're recording on the 25th of September 2020. All the information we're sharing is correct at the time of recording. I think it's probably helpful, Dany, to clarify first off, what do we mean when we talk about mental health?

Dany: Hi. It's great to be back. Mental health really is our emotional and psychological well-being. It's very linked to our social well-being. It's how we think, how we feel, and how we act as individuals. If we're struggling emotionally, it can actually affect how we respond to stress, relate to those around us, and also how we make choices for ourselves.

Emma: I mean, these are really challenging times for everybody, clearly. A lot of people and especially the British, we're very good at putting a brave face on. How do you recognize when somebody maybe needs some help that they're struggling?

Dany: People can recognize that they need help if they're starting to feel overly anxious about things. People will recognize that in themselves. Also, if their mood changes and they're feeling low, and can't really explain it more of the time than the normal because we all have our ups and downs with all the ordinary things that affect our life, but this is something a little bit different. You're overthinking things. You're worrying about things more or less every day, and for good portions of the day.

File name: macmillan series 2 episode 2.mp3



People may lose their appetite. They may not be sleeping. They may not have any interest in doing the things that they normally really enjoy doing that is part of them as an individual. It's really important to remember if you're feeling those things that you're not alone. At Macmillan, we hear huge numbers of people looking for emotional support once they have a cancer diagnosis. It's just really important to know that you can reach out and get some help.

Emma: A cancer diagnosis turns your world upside down, anyway. In this set of circumstances, in lockdown with restrictions, it's going to be quite difficult to distinguish a fairly normal reaction to a really worrying piece of news.

Dany: Absolutely. I think we need to remember and I think we can probably all relate to it. Those that we really care about the most, we do know them, and we often know them inside out. Often we can tell when something's wrong before they recognize it in themselves. I think I would say go with your gut and your heart and your head, if you feel that about a loved one, that something's not quite right. They're not wanting to communicate. They're not answering calls, or you notice they're not eating and also if they're getting up in the night and sitting on the sofa with a cup of tea, and that's not normal for them.

I think there would be subtle changes. Yes, you might think that's linked to a cancer diagnosis, but I think that the key is if it persists, perhaps goes on for a prolonged time and is impacting on every aspect of their life, I think those closest to you would know that something was fundamentally different to just being upset about a cancer diagnosis and anxious about what's going to happen.

Emma: With the additional restrictions, which only just this week, we've been told that quite possibly may run until the spring now. That's going to have an extra impact on people's anxiety about their treatment programs, who they can go to. Is there reassurance that you can give to people that have just received a diagnosis that they can go and ask reasonable questions about what happens next to make them feel less anxious about what lies ahead in this strange time?

Dany: I think it's really important when people are having to socially isolate and maybe having some of their interactions with their cancer team and healthcare professionals in a virtual way, and maybe only going actually into the center for any treatment, or they may not be having treatment. They may be having a treatment pause. We know that being isolated really does have a negative effect on people's mental health. That is an addition really, to what they're going through in terms of anxiety with a cancer diagnosis and their treatment and the future.

Then the anxiety of COVID and then the anxiety of social isolation and not being able to. Even that physical contact with people that you love is really, really important. It's human nature, isn't it, to have a hug if you're a hugger? Obviously, for people that have been told they've got incurable cancer, but might be having treatments to hold the cancer at bay, the uncertainty must be tenfold what they normally feel, but there is a great deal of support out there.

Emma: Now Macmillan is receiving a number of calls to their support line for emotional support. I spoke with Rosie and Mark in our last episode about people being told that they have cancer without a friend or a loved one for support. Of course, many people who are choosing to continue to shield or reduce their contact with the public, that's got to take a huge emotional toll. Why might people be feeling the impact on their mental health more acutely than ever?

Dany: This year is just so different to how we normally live our lives with the social isolation and not being able to do the things that you would normally do. Some of the advice we give people when they're worried is to get out and about, talk to friends, take up a new hobby, and actually, that's slightly more challenging. It's not that you can't do it in your own home. Of course, if you're having treatment, people may need to socially isolate before their treatment or surgery. If you're on chemotherapy, then during that your immune system is going to be at risk. Whilst that's normal, ordinarily, people can still find safe ways to go out and about and do things that they enjoy. Whereas I think that's harder if you're confined to your own home.

Emma: As always, Macmillan have fingers and avenues in all sorts of places, and there is support out there for people who feel like they are struggling mentally. Where are the first ports of call, Dany? Where can people go for some help or support?

Dany: There's a great deal of support out there and people can choose the means of support that suits them because we're all different. For example, some people are very comfortable using support groups or peer support and they can do that in a virtual way. Macmillan have an online community, but some of our information and support centers have set up virtual support. They can speak to their cancer team, or they can ring our support line, and they can find out about those things, or they can go onto our website and just see what's available.

If people are really struggling, and they like to speak to someone rather than do something virtual, they can ring our support line. They might be able to tap into some of the services that we've put together like telephone buddies, wellbeing coaches to help them maintain their physical and emotional well-being. There's some information on our website about virtual physical activity because we know that actually remaining active can support emotional well-being. They can also talk to their cancer team or their GP if they're really worried about how they're feeling and they will facilitate that in a safe way if they're going through treatment.

For people that really like digital, there's a whole range of apps out there that can support them. We've tried to review some apps and create a marketplace on our website for apps that can help people that are struggling emotionally. I think there's a wealth of information there, but what I will say is speak to their cancer team or their GP, or go to a trusted website like the Macmillan website, or pick up the phone and phone the support line and help is there.

Emma: You just mentioned there, Dany, the telephone buddy system, which Rosie's mentioned, and I love it. Can you tell us a little bit more about how that works?



Dany: Yes, so our telephone buddies are our usual volunteers who obviously can't support people in the way that they normally do because of social distancing. They're basically at the end of a phone to support people with advice, practical needs, and just to be a listening ear.

Emma: I think it's really important that you've just really emphasized that there is something for the super tech-savvy, right through to people who, "If it's a computer, I can't do it," because it is important. Because for a lot of people doing a Zoom chat with somebody they've never met before is not great. It's not a great option for some people. I love the telephone buddy system that you've got there. I think it's really cool. There's an access point for everybody along the tech scale, isn't there?

Dany: There is.

Emma: Saying that, picking up the phone for the first time when you have decided and made that call that you are struggling a little bit is a big step, isn't it? What would you say to somebody sitting there going, "I don't know. Am I making a fuss? I really don't know whether I should do this or not."?

Dany: I would say they've absolutely taken the first step in acknowledging that perhaps they need help. Maybe the first thing to do is just talk it through with someone that they feel comfortable with, whether that's a friend, or their GP, or even their cancer team and just to talk it through. Certainly, having been a cancer nurse, nothing is ever too slight for you to listen to. People often think, oh, I don't want to worry them or this is really silly. If it's constantly on your mind, the best thing to do is to talk to somebody about it and make that first step then to find out where to get help.

Emma: Dany, absolutely brilliant as always. Stay there. Don't move. We're going to be speaking to you shortly.

Voice over: Questions about cancer, Boots and Macmillan are by your side from the moment you're diagnosed through your treatment and beyond. Our Boots Macmillan information pharmacists are on hand with specialist support from helping you make sense of your diagnosis, to advice about living with cancer. You can find them in your local Boots pharmacy or online via video appointment. Visit boots.com/macmillan for more information. Subject to pharmacist availability.

Carol: Hi. I'm Carol. I'm 38. I'm from Manchester. I was initially diagnosed with primary breast cancer in December 2019 and then with secondary breast cancer in February this year. Lockdown was massively anxiety-inducing. So much was outside of all of our control, so I dealt with my anxiety by trying to focus on the things that I could control like the next few hours or the next few days. I found it quite helpful to limit my exposure to all the doom and gloom in the news. I focused on things that made me happy like catching up with family and friends virtually.

I started learning Italian during the lockdown randomly. I exercised and threw myself into things like campaigning for Macmillan. I also found meditation really helped as



well. I found that was really helpful in trying to make me focus on the present a bit more and not worry so much about the future.

Emma: I think you'll agree, some really useful advice from Carol there. For people who are having to self isolate, Dany, before treatment or surgery, or if someone in your household is showing symptoms of Coronavirus. We've heard how lonely this experience can be. I mean, it must be awful. How can people stay connected?

Dany: Yes, it is difficult. Actually, we live in a really connected world now. Lots of people have adapted through lockdown to using FaceTime and WhatsApp to stay connected to friends and family. However, it's still hard if you can't get out and about in the usual way. People might want to explore things in a virtual way. We've seen lots of things like people doing virtual bingo with their family, or if they love gardens, the National Garden Scheme have got virtual gardens that people can access. It's all about finding what you like. There is a lot there.

I do appreciate that there are some people that are perhaps not adapt at that kind of digital, but there will always be someone in their family that is and so rather than feeling isolated, sit down with a family member and look at what's there and find things that work for you.

Emma: We've talked a little bit as well, which I'm sure adds another layer of anxiety that due to the pandemic it's meant for some people that they're having to face delays from diagnosis right through to where they are on their treatment plans. What guidance can you give to help people ease that anxiety they might be experiencing around those delays? What are reasonable questions that people should be asking?

Dany: I think it's really, really important that any anxiety they have about their treatment that they do talk to their cancer team and their cancer nurse specialists because they will have all the information about them as a person, their cancer. If people are worried about delays to their treatment, they need to talk it through and understand what the impact is for them. If you're not going through active treatment and you're worried, then have a conversation with your GP about whether you should be worried because those are the people that have the most information about your health and what to worry about and what not to worry about.

Emma: Dany, as always, a fount of knowledge and a voice of support and comfort. Thank you so much. Lovely to speak to you again. For more information on the topics Dany and I have talked about in this episode, head to our website, macmillan.org.uk/talking-cancer for resources, advice, and support. It's also where you can find out more about donating to Macmillan. In our next episode, we're talking about work and cancer in the age of Coronavirus. Subscribe if you'd like to hear that and every new episode whenever it's ready.

If you enjoy the series, we'd love it if you could give us a rating or a review so that others can find the podcast more easily. I'm Emma B. *Talking Cancer* is a Macmillan cancer support podcast.

[00:16:29] [END OF AUDIO]

File name: macmillan series 2 episode 2.mp3