

### Series 3, Episode 4: Cancer, grief and picking up the pieces

**Angie:** How do you navigate a cancer diagnosis, while dealing with grief?

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**Angie:** Hello, I'm Angie Greaves, and welcome back to Talking Cancer, a podcast room MacMillan sponsored by our friends over at Boots. Where I meet real people to have conversations about living with cancer. I also speak to McMillan professionals and experts at Boots who share their knowledge and advice to help anyone living with or affected by cancer to live life as fully as they can. Today, we are talking cancer with Chris.

**Chris:** In a slump and I wasn't too sure, but if there could be something wrong.

**Angie:** In 2007, whilst living and working with family in Cyprus, Chris noticed a lump in his testicle. After confiding in his dad, who encouraged him to get it checked with a doctor, he was diagnosed with testicular cancer.

**Chris:** He told me there in then while I was having the scan yes, this is cancer.

**Angie:** Sadly in 2015, Chris lost his dad to tongue cancer. Just six months later, Chris was diagnosed with testicular cancer for a second time.

**Chris:** There's always light at the end of the tunnel, you can always carry on with life, push on, as I did, really.

**Angie:** I'll be talking to Chris about his cancer diagnosis and how he dealt with grief after losing his dad. We'll also be speaking to Mark Donovan, who's the chief pharmacist at Boots for guidance on how people can seek support when dealing with grief.

**Mark:** If you continue to be overwhelmed by your feelings, it's important to get the right help and support.

**Angie:** We're McMillan and we're talking cancer. Chris, welcome, and thank you for joining us today. I hear that you lived in Cyprus for a while, tell us about that.

**Chris:** Yes, so it was in 2003. My mom and dad had been on holiday. When they got back, they sat me and my sister down and said how'd you feel about moving to Cyprus? We were pretty excited for it. I did a exam to get into the school over there and within the space of a few weeks, we were moved over and we spent our first Christmas in Cyprus.

**Angie:** A pretty quick transition then.

**Chris:** It was yes. Some of the best times of my life were in Cyprus.

**Angie:** Brilliant. Can you tell us about your diagnosis? I believe you confided in your dad when you found the lump, and so what did he say to you when you spoke to him?

**Chris:** I was actually back in the UK, when I first noticed a lump, I rang my parents in Cyprus. I was due to fly back within the next day or so. I said that I found this lump and I

wasn't too sure about it. I thought, there could be something wrong. The Monday came me and my dad went to work as usual. We had a little bit of a chat about it. He basically pushed me to go and get it checked. We were there for less than a couple of hours. I'd had a scan and there and then I was told that it was cancer. The doctor didn't even wait to send a letter out. He told me there and then while I was having the scan that, yes, this is cancer and we need to book you in as soon as possible. It was bit of a shock really.

**Angie:** Because I was going to ask you, how long was it before you got the diagnosis? It seems strange or harsh to get the appointment and the diagnosis. It must have taken you a back.

**Chris:** Yes, because it's not as if you waiting like usually, if you go for something like that, you'd be waiting for the diagnosis. You'd be waiting like a week or so, but he even said that we'll book you in for this week. I think from the diagnosis on the Monday, I was booked in for the Friday for the operation. It literally just hit you, like you just had at a brick wall, you're like, oh.

**Angie:** Okay. You've got this diagnosis now, you're in Cyprus, what was going through your mind?

**Chris:** I was only 19 at the time. I was like, I'm too young for this. Why is this happened and what am I gonna do and obviously, how am I going to be after surgery and everything? You've got questions like that running through your head. Then I have to tell my mom, obviously the news that we just got from the hospital, she knew we were going, but obviously didn't expect us to come back with the news that we did. Yes, it was a big shock.

**Angie:** Did you know anyone with cancer? Had it touched your friends or family before? Like you say, you were quite young.

**Chris:** Yes. When I was younger, I had grandparents that had gone through cancer and I know that my dad had gone through cancer when he was 27, but I didn't really think about it too much. Just obviously, as long as they're all right. This time, it did feel new really.

**Angie:** How did your love one's react when you told them the news of the diagnosis, especially your mom?

**Chris:** It was really upsetting for my mom. It was literally at the front door of the house and she'd welcome me, opening the door. I just said it, I just said it's cancer and she broke down and the first thing she said, she said, you're too young to go through this. What do you say? There's nothing really you can say, but they were so good taking me to the hospital, looking after me and anything that I needed.

**Angie:** Then was it December, 2013, you are back living in the UK and then your father is diagnosed with tongue cancer. How did you feel when he got his diagnosis?

**Chris:** Awful. My dad had knew something wasn't right for possibly about a month beforehand. It was our first Christmas, all of us being back in the UK when he got told this time, we knew it was a bit more serious, it just didn't feel right. It was one of his

best friends basically pushed him to go to the hospital while he was over here. Well, it's the GP and yes, he got diagnosed here which basically, it was a bigger impact this time because me and my dad had set up a business in Cyprus and he needed to stay back in the UK to go through his treatment. It wasn't just the impact of my dad's health. It was like, how are we going to support financially as well. He went for the operation on his tongue, which I think was booked in for the January, February, and just after he had had the operation, I decided to fly back out to Cyprus and carry on running the business, try and keep money coming in for us.

**Angie:** Okay. Chris, you're back in Cyprus, obviously, your father's health is very important to you, but you're running a business as well. You are running the business in Cyprus, dad's in the UK undergoing treatment. Do you know what kind of treatment he had?

**Chris:** The treatment that he went through included chemotherapy, radiotherapy on his neck, because the cancer had actually spread to his lymph nodes. He had a 12 hour operation to remove the cancer on his tongue, which was a really invasive surgery. They did a skin graft on his arm to replace the tongue that they cut away and a skin graft on his thigh, which would then replace the skin that they took from his wrist. What I would do is every time that I knew my dad was going to go in for treatment, I'd get a flight back to the UK to spend time, have a few weeks back here while he was going through all this different type of treatment. Then once I knew that he was starting to recover, then fly back out and try and carry on running the business.

**Angie:** Now, I know you described your dad as your best friend. Unfortunately he did pass in 2015. How did his loss, how did that impact you? How did you get through it?

**Chris:** I wouldn't say it's a matter of getting him through it. It's so hard. This was a dad that I worked with, that I used to go out drinking with. He was more of a best friend really. I spent so much time with my dad, even when I was out Cyprus and he was back here, I'd ring him probably every single day and see how he was getting on really. It was so hard, I'd lost my working partner. I'd lost my best friend. It's like, you just have to start again and that was probably the hardest time really, hardest part in my life was trying to pick up again.

**Angie:** It sounded like you had a real father-son friendly relationship. It sounded as though he was more than a father, a real pinnacle in your life. Who did you turn to for support in your time of grief?

**Chris:** I'd met my partner, Sarah back came in February, 2015. Sarah had only know my dad while he was poorly. It was a tough time really for us to meet because she basically got thrown in the deep end. My dad was really struggling at this point and we'd only been together a few months when my dad got told that it was terminal. On that particular day that he got told that it was terminal, Sarah had booked a full day out in Manchester because it was around my birthday. I was like, how can I go and enjoy myself when I know that my life is about to completely change? My dad's going to be taken away from me. My dad knew that all this had been booked, and he said, "Look, " he said, "There's nothing we can change about what is happening." He said, "Go and

just try to enjoy yourself." He was always thinking about other people. He never felt sorry for himself. Always making people laugh.

**Angie:** He sounded like he would've wanted you to just take the best of him, the best of your friendship with him and live the best life that you possibly could. That's who I'm hearing you are describing to me.

**Chris:** Yes. He basically taught me to just, "Enjoy yourself. No matter what life throws at you, enjoy yourself." I really feel that that is what has helped me get through. Going through cancer myself is just his view on life. For moving to Cyprus, he's taught me basically like there's more to life than just work. With us working together, we might have a bit of a tough day so, right, we're going to finish for the day, we'll go and enjoy our self. We can pick up tomorrow, we'll sort it out. It doesn't matter. He was a great person to look up to.

**Angie:** Then you're diagnosed with testicular cancer for a second time. What was going through your mind when you got the second diagnosis?

**Chris:** It was actually while my dad was still around. I noticed a heavy sensation in my testicle and I had a funny feeling that something wasn't right. I actually got it checked out. This time, I didn't want to put any more pressure on my mom and dad at this point. Obviously my mom caught wind this and she said, "Why didn't you say anything to us?" I said, "Well, we've got enough on really with what my dad's going through." I said, that's why I didn't say anything. I went for a scan at the hospital where they did pick-up something, but they concluded that it was dormant. They said, "You can live like that for the rest of your life." They said it may never pop-up. They said, "Just make sure you keep checking yourself." That was great news really, but after checking myself, I did eventually notice a lump. I began to panic a bit at this point, because I think I knew this wasn't going to be good. I went onto the NHS website and I managed to get a number for one of the help lines. I rang them straight up and I said, "Look, previously, I've testicular cancer and I found another lump. I'm not too sure." The lady on the line was super, she said, "Look, if you want to head to the hospital right now to get checked out," She said, "I can totally understand. If you want to do that," She said, "If not, I can book an appointment for you first thing in the morning at your GP." I chose to go for the morning appointment with the GP who then referred me to go for another scan. In the UK, they don't tell you straight away. I'd had my scan and it took a week to receive a letter and the letter said, obviously, "Can you attend the hospital." I had a funny feeling something wasn't going to be right. That's when they told us that "Yes, we've got cancer again," basically.

**Angie:** The first time around, you'd had your dad as a source of support. I know your mother was obviously still very much there for you, but by the way you describe your relationship and your friendship with your dad, how did you find getting through it on the second diagnosis? How was that for you?

**Chris:** Second diagnosis, completely different this time. Second time around, it's bigger. It's different. This is going to change everything now. I had loads of questions. I didn't have my dad around, so I couldn't ask asking any questions. Obviously just missing my dad was really hard this time.

**Angie:** With a cancer like testicular cancer, I'm going to assume that questions of fertility would've been on your mind. Was there any talk of maybe fertility preservation?

**Chris:** Yes. One of the main questions was obviously about fertility because there'd been no chance of having children. After this operation, I got referred to a fertility clinic in Manchester. I went to the fertility clinic, got a letter back about a week later saying that it was unsuccessful, that they couldn't find any sperm in there. Whether this was to do with the tumor blocking this or what, we didn't really have the answers to that, but at the end of the day, it was basically that this wasn't going to work. We spoke to the doctor about this after. He said they could try once they've removed the testicle to then try and retrieve sperm from that. Unfortunately, that wasn't going to work as well, after the operation the second time. That was it really.

**Angie:** I know that you had another loss in 2019, didn't you?

**Chris:** Yes. This was whilst me and Sarah was traveling. We decided to pack everything up and go on a one way ticket to Australia. As we were traveling there, we flew across to Perth as Sarah's sister was getting married over there, and it was at this wedding that I met Nathan. He'd originally gone through testicular cancer, just like myself. We happened to get chatting. We must have spoke for about an hour outside of the wedding venue, which was quite funny at the time because we kept looking back into the wedding venue and there'd be someone being picked up in the air, somebody on a chair in the air, and we'd be laughing between ourselves, but we also had had a chart as we had this in common. We decided to keep in touch, once we'd come back to the UK, we'd send messages to each other. I'd see how he's getting on, and he'd ask me, how we're getting on with traveling. What were we up to and such a lovely guy. We were planning to meet up with him when we got back from Australia. This is when I think we was only about a week away from getting back to the UK when we got the news, basically that he'd passed away. He was only 22. The cancer had spread to his bones and there was nothing they could do.

**Angie:** Chris, you've had a tough few years, but you've kept going forward. You've kept going forward. What do you think has kept you going? There must be something in you that you attribute your strength to that's kept you going.

**Chris:** Yes. It's everything that my dad's passed on to me. He's just like, his outlook on life was always positive and he just carried on through life no matter what it threw at him. He always had people laughing and my girlfriend, Sarah as well, she's really been super through it all and my mom. I got to give it to my mom really.

**Angie:** Even though there's other support systems there out there, do you find that it is really the love of your family that's kept you one day after another, keep going?

**Chris:** Yes, we was always a really close family. We'd be out every weekend for meals. We'd spend a lot of time together. We were a very close family.

**Angie:** What advice would you give people who are dealing with grief? If there's one thing you could pass on, what would it be?

**Chris:** I'd say, think to yourself, and there's always light at the end of the tunnel. You can always carry on my life. Push on as I did really.

**Angie:** Chris, what does the future look like for you? You're going to push on. What plans do you have for the future?

**Chris:** Oh, I don't know. Me and Sarah are always on about heading abroad again. When we came back from Australia, we were in between heading back abroad again. Unfortunately, that was the winter that coronavirus hit. It changed our plans, but we'd saved up enough money then to buy a house back here. It just shows whatever, life plans can change, we'll take it as it comes. If the world opens up again, we'll go traveling again. We'd love seeing the world. It opens your mind to different places and people. We really do enjoy that.

**Angie:** What would your dad say to you?

**Chris:** I'm sure he'd say, "Carry on what you're doing. Enjoy yourself, keep smiling. You only get one life. Live it."

**Angie:** Chris, thank you so much for sharing. Thank you so much. Chris: Oh, a pleasure. Thank you. [music]

**Speaker 4:** Questions about cancer. Boots of McMillan are by your side from the moment you're diagnosed, through your treatment, and beyond. Our Boots McMillan information pharmacists are on hand with specialists' support, from helping you make sense of your diagnosis, to advice about living with cancer, you can now access this specialist cancer support at every Boots pharmacy in the UK. Visit [Boots.com/McMillan](https://www.boots.com/McMillan) for more information, subject to pharmacist availability.

**Angie:** Welcome Mark. Thank you so much for joining us today. Now, can you tell us a little bit about your role?

**Mark:** Hi, Angie. Yes. It's great to have another opportunity to talk cancer. My role is the chief pharmacist of Boots, and we've had a partnership of course, with McMillan for many years. Many of our pharmacists now are Boots McMillan information pharmacists that are in our pharmacies because we think it's really important that those people who are affected by cancer can gain as much support as possible wherever they are.

**Angie:** We've just been talking about grief with Chris, and we know that for lots of people before they pass away, palliative and end-of-life support is really crucial. Can explain to us what the difference is between palliative and end-of-life support.

**Mark:** Sure. The terms palliative care or end-of-life care can often be used interchangeably, but there are some important differences. Palliative care is treatment care and support for people with life-limiting illness and their family and friends. The aim of palliative care is to help you to have a good quality of life. This includes being as well and active as possible in the time that you have left. A life-limiting illness is an illness that can't be cured and that you are likely to die from. Some people might call this illness life threatening, or sometimes they use the word terminal don't they, some people might also describe the illness as progressive, which means that it gets worse over time and you can receive palliative care at any stage in your illness. Having

palliative care doesn't necessarily mean that you're likely to die soon. Some people receive palliative care for years and years. You can also have palliative care alongside treatments and therapies and medicines aimed at control in your illness, such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy, but an important part of palliative care is about caring for people who are nearing the end of life. That is sometimes called end-of-life care. It's important to understand that it's for people who are thought to be in the last year of life, but of course, this timeframe can be very difficult to predict.

**Angie:** I know you've just given a really good example of palliative care, end-of-life care. Can you just maybe give me some specific points of what it might look like, what end of life and palliative care might look like?

**Mark:** It often involves managing physical symptoms, such as pain, but it can include and should include emotional, spiritual, psychological support as well. Other support such as social care, which may include help with things like washing or dressing, or eating. It's really important. We mustn't forget this. There's also an element of support for your family and friends too. You may need more of this type of support toward the end of your life. In end-of-life care, talking to you and the family and friends about what to expect towards the end of your life is very important to enable you to die well. This is sometimes referred to as an advanced care plan, which is simply a plan put in place by the palliative care to coordinate your care.

**Angie:** Somebody's just been told that they are eligible for palliative or end-of-life care. This can understandably be upsetting to hear. Where can people go for support and also information?

**Mark:** It can be very upsetting of course, but remember, there's lots of support available for both you and your family and friends as well. A member of the palliative care team is a good place to start. That could be the specialist palliative care doctor or palliative care nurse, but each team often have others you can talk to too, like a social worker, a physiotherapist, a pharmacist, a counselor, and even a chaplain or a spiritual care coordinator as well. MacMillan professionals are often part of that team. Remember that the MacMillan cancer support line is open seven days a week, 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM, where you can talk to a MacMillan professional, or you can chat online or email in, all confidentially of course, and MacMillan host online communities too on a number of different topics, which are really are wonderful support. In those online communities, there's a forum for patients living with incurable cancer too.

**Angie:** Are there ways to access support in the community?

**Mark:** When you are being looked after at home, it's your GP, of course, that has overall responsibility for your care, but there are other healthcare professionals who work in the community that your GP will be able to help you decide whether you need them. They include community nurses that come visit home, occupational therapists that might be able to help adjust things in your home to help you manage a bit better or physiotherapists who can help you find the right exercise for you to help you keep moving or even reduce pain too. Sometimes you might be referred to a hospice or a palliative care unit of a hospital. In there, you'll find lots of support where they assess and manage your illness. You're likely to meet some of the palliative care, which work

out in the community, and come to visit you at home. McMillan nurses can help you with a number of different things from understanding your symptoms and helping with medication or even the financial help, and Boots and McMillan have had a long partnership and we've trained our pharmacist to be McMillan information pharmacist, and you can now access them in all of our pharmacies. They can help with understanding where to go for help wider than that, of course, and many people at the end of their life will need medication and our pharmacists can help with the medication needs too

**Angie:** I was going to ask what support is there for loved ones, they're going to need support as well.

**Mark:** It's really important to look after loved ones too, isn't it? I know that for many patients with advanced cancer, this is something that they need to make sure happens and it bothers them and they worry about their loved ones. Palliative care is for everyone affected by cancer. Of course, it would be focused on the person directly affected, but it's okay that others ask for help too. In fact, it's welcomed.

**Angie:** Of course, when someone is coming to the end of their life, it can be really difficult to talk about. Do you have any advice for what language to use around somebody coming to the end of their life or where people can go for guidance?

**Mark:** It can be so very difficult and sometimes the words just, I guess, cannot be found. There's no right or wrong way, I think that's really important to remember. You might want to plan a time and a place to have a discussion so that you can think about what you want to say in advance. Sometimes, it might be easier to have a conversation more casual, like walking around a park or over a meal, but with most difficult conversations, honesty is usually the best, try not to be worried about showing your emotions. It's normal to find these conversations difficult, but it's always good to talk. Tell them that you love them. You're scared, worried about what will happen. Whatever's on your mind really. I guess accept that conversation's going to be hard. My dad passed away 10 years ago with incurable cancer. I remember trying to start a conversation about him dying very clearly. He was a gentle, private shy man. I can remember the times I tried to start a conversation. Many times I tried to start a conversation, but it was too hard. Then there was one time that my mum, my dad, and myself were in the living room. I just felt that I just had to say something, anything. I blurted out, we need to talk about when you die. It felt so cold. It felt really factual. It was a surreal conversation. I remember, and I wanted it to be so much more compassionate than it actually sounded, but I knew it was the right thing to do. I asked him about what he was worried about. We talked about his fears about not being able to look after them. I asked him about what he thought about his funeral, to my surprise, he had thought about it, what songs he wanted, a simple casket. He wanted to die at home. It was a really hard conversation and we were all in tears, of course, but I'm glad that we had it. Afterwards, some days when I rang him up, the conversation was simply, was it a good day dad or was it a bad day? Others, a bit more than that, but the first conversation opened up a door to discuss other things. He'd say, "Have we sorted the undertakers yet?" Because for him, that was the one thing that he really didn't want mum to do. That was the really important thing to him. I was able to reassure him that I had that clearly took a weight



off his mind. It's going to be upsetting and it's going to be hard, but start the conversation.

**Angie:** Thanks for sharing that piece of guidance Mark. When somebody does reach the end of their life and they pass away, there are lots of options to help those around them deal with grief. Can you tell us a bit about this?

**Mark:** We have to recognize that grief is a natural response to losing someone you care about and there's no right or wrong way to grieve. Everyone's experience of grief is individual, of course. The important thing to do is what feels right for you and allow yourself time to do it. These feelings soon after will be at their most intense and for some, they'll be most intense weeks or months afterwards. You may find it hard to cope with your emotions and also the practical things that you have to do of course. McMillan has lots of information to help you cope with some of those feelings or questions that you might have. The cancer support line is still there to help you when somebody is passed away. There's plenty of practical information and support starting importantly without you support yourself. Then lots of other practical matters that perhaps need to be addressed, like caring for the body or registering the death or telling others about the death, funeral arrangements, and things like that. You can find support for all these things at [mcmillan.org](http://mcmillan.org). McMillan has a fantastic booklet, which covers these things.

**Angie:** Some people may suffer from prolonged bereavement, Mark, or can you tell us a bit about this? Where can people go to access support?

**Mark:** Some people find life very difficult following bereavement and overwhelmed by their feelings for months or years after their relative or friend had died. They may find it difficult or even impossible to return to work or socialize with friends or they might not sleep well or find it hard to get out of bed in the morning. That's what we mean by prolonged bereavement. Others may have suicidal thoughts too. If it's prolonged bereavement and as I've said, there's no right or wrong way to grieve and there's set period of time to grieve for. If you continue to be overwhelmed by your feelings, it's important to get the right help and support, and you should talk to your GP. You should talk about how you are feeling and the GP may suggest some extra support for you, which might include referring you to a bereavement support group or a counselor or even prescribing some medication to help you with the way that you are feeling. Of course, there's still lots of support available on the McMillan website or from the support line even after somebody has died.

**Angie:** Mark Donovan, thank you so much for your time and your words of encouragement.

**Mark:** Thanks, Angie.

**Angie:** My thanks to Chris for speaking so openly with us today and sharing his story and to Mark for his guidance and advice. If you'd like more information about the things we've talked about in this episode, and for more information about how to donate, please visit the McMillan website, [www.mcmillan.org.uk/podcast](http://www.mcmillan.org.uk/podcast). I'm Angie Greaves Talking Cancer is a McMillan cancer support podcast.

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