

# WHEN CANCER CATCHES YOU OFF GUARD

A cancer diagnosis can be traumatic, both as a patient and as a loved one. Here's what to expect. Does cancer seem unlikely or like a distant possibility? For Laurie Gaum, facing a sudden diagnosis of stage 3 lung cancer was the last thing he ever expected.

'Sometimes life forces you to face your reality. The first few months were a difficult, introspective process for me, some of it very dark,' he says.

## ANY SERIOUS ILLNESS CAN AFFECT MENTAL WELL-BEING

'Receiving a potentially fatal diagnosis, going through treatment protocols and learning to live with limitations are not only devastating, but can also lead to depression for many patients,' says Prof Michael Herbst, a health specialist at the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA).'

He adds, 'A new study from Germany maintains that 32% of cancer patients can develop full-blown psychological disorders such as anxiety or depression. This is why managing your mental health needs plays such a pivotal role in your treatment programme and may even impact on your prognosis and recovery.'

A cancer diagnosis goes hand in hand with a whirlwind of emotions: shock, fear, anger, sadness, denial, feeling like you've lost control and feeling overwhelmed. While these are all completely normal reactions, every person's journey is different, so you should address whatever feelings you or a loved one experience.

## DON'T IGNORE THE SYMPTOMS

As one in three cancer patients battle anxiety or depression, the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) recommends looking for signs that you or your loved one may be developing a mental health condition.

Symptoms include:

- Feeling sad or anxious all the time
- Feeling restless and being easily irritated
- Sleeping and eating too little or too much
- Feeling helpless or hopeless

When a person with cancer gets treatment for a mental health condition, it can improve their chance of recovery. Treatment is also important for anyone with a mental health condition. It's important that everyone involved shares their needs and expectations. Make a conscious effort to be patient and gracious with those diagnosed, caretakers and yourself.



## A SURVIVOR'S STORY

The biggest challenge for Laurie Gaum was learning to deal with the twists and turns of his cancer journey.

As his immune system restored itself, he found himself making an unexpected emotional adjustment. 'I had post treatment depression for a couple of months. I'd had the profound experience preparing for the possibility of death, and all of a sudden I had to contemplate a change in direction – I was going to live! It was difficult,' he recalls.

Laurie's cancer has been in remission since 2013. Reflecting on what he's learnt from the journey, Laurie says it taught him to better cope with life and treat people with more love

'I no longer waste too much time on things I don't want. I think I'm more effective now in working out what's necessary and where to make the most impact with my precious life.'

## REMEMBER, YOU'RE NOT ALONE

It's important to remember to share your feelings and emotions with your medical team, family and friends. Support is vital during a cancer journey, and HealthyCompany can help with many online resources as well as counselling for financial and emotional support or offering legal assistance where required. Call our 24 hour support line for further advice or professional assistance.

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