



BLADDER CANCER AND MENTAL HEALTH

On the following pages we examine the mental health issues commonly associated with bladder cancer, with personal stories of how many patients have overcome such difficulties and gone on to live a happy and healthy life.

FBC offers all kinds of support just when you need it

- Private forum on Facebook
- FIGHT magazine
- Bladder Buddy scheme
- Online support groups
- Phone support on 01844 351621
- Email support at support@fightbladdercancer.co.uk
- Website at fightbladdercancer.co.uk
- Social media – Twitter @BladderCancerUK and Facebook @Fight Bladder Cancer
- Patient information booklets

10 STEPS to help improve your mental health

- 1 Do some exercise – it does not have to be much, just going for a short walk helps
- 2 Breathe some fresh air – whether for exercise or just being outside
- 3 Talk to a friend or family member
- 4 Message a friend or meet up
- 5 Do something you enjoy – watch a film, try an old or new hobby, dance to the radio
- 6 Eat well
- 7 Get enough sleep every night
- 8 Relax – with yoga, meditation, mindfulness or whatever suits you
- 9 Listen to some music
- 10 Look for support groups

Admitting your weaknesses can make you stronger

ARTICLE
WENDIE MORLEY
FBC forum member

As a community psychiatric nurse, Wendie spent a career helping others cope with problems such as anxiety, depression and stress. Strong and able to cope, she just got on with life, tending to appear calm and keep any doubts and uncertainties hidden away. When she faced her own cancer diagnosis, it changed her perspective.

My journey into bladder cancer started in 1999 when I had my first TURBT. I was informed that the tumour was low grade and superficial. The procedure was done every six months for the next 18 years and each time I was told I was one of the lucky ones and had a good mental attitude. I heard this so many times that I couldn't help but believe it and it helped me to sweep any self-doubt under the carpet. At that time, I didn't have access to the internet, Google or any other support system, so I just carried on with my life.

Following my TURBT in 2017 I received a call from the urologist to say that he would like to see me in clinic. Still I wasn't overly concerned as for 18 years nothing of any significance had changed.

Totally shocked

When I met my urologist, he told me that one of my kidneys was non-functioning and it would be advisable to remove it. By the look on his face I could tell there was more. He said that since the previous check six months ago, my diagnosis had become T2G3 with widespread CIS. I felt as though I had been punched in the stomach. The air seemed to have left my body, I felt hot and sweaty and was fighting back the tears. These feelings were totally alien to me. I can vividly remember that there was total silence in the room until the urologist said, 'I



am so very sorry and totally shocked at the rate of growth.' His advice was to remove my bladder and kidney as soon as possible.

I left the hospital shocked and numb. When I arrived home I just burst into tears and my husband was shocked as it was totally out of character for me. In 2006 when I was diagnosed with a brain tumour (fortunately benign) I remained fairly calm and never shed a tear, so the poor man couldn't quite grasp what was going on.

The next week of waiting seemed to be the longest week of my life. I was frightened that I had lost my coping skills; how I would cope with a bag was the biggest issue. Would I feel different from other people? How would my family cope, especially my husband? Would I feel less of a woman? Would I have to face death? I spent hours thinking about all these things. The surgery took place the following week. None of my fears transpired and life continued as normal. Fast forward just over three years and life for me is good and cancer free.

Learn to share your feelings

What I have learned from this experience is that I do not always

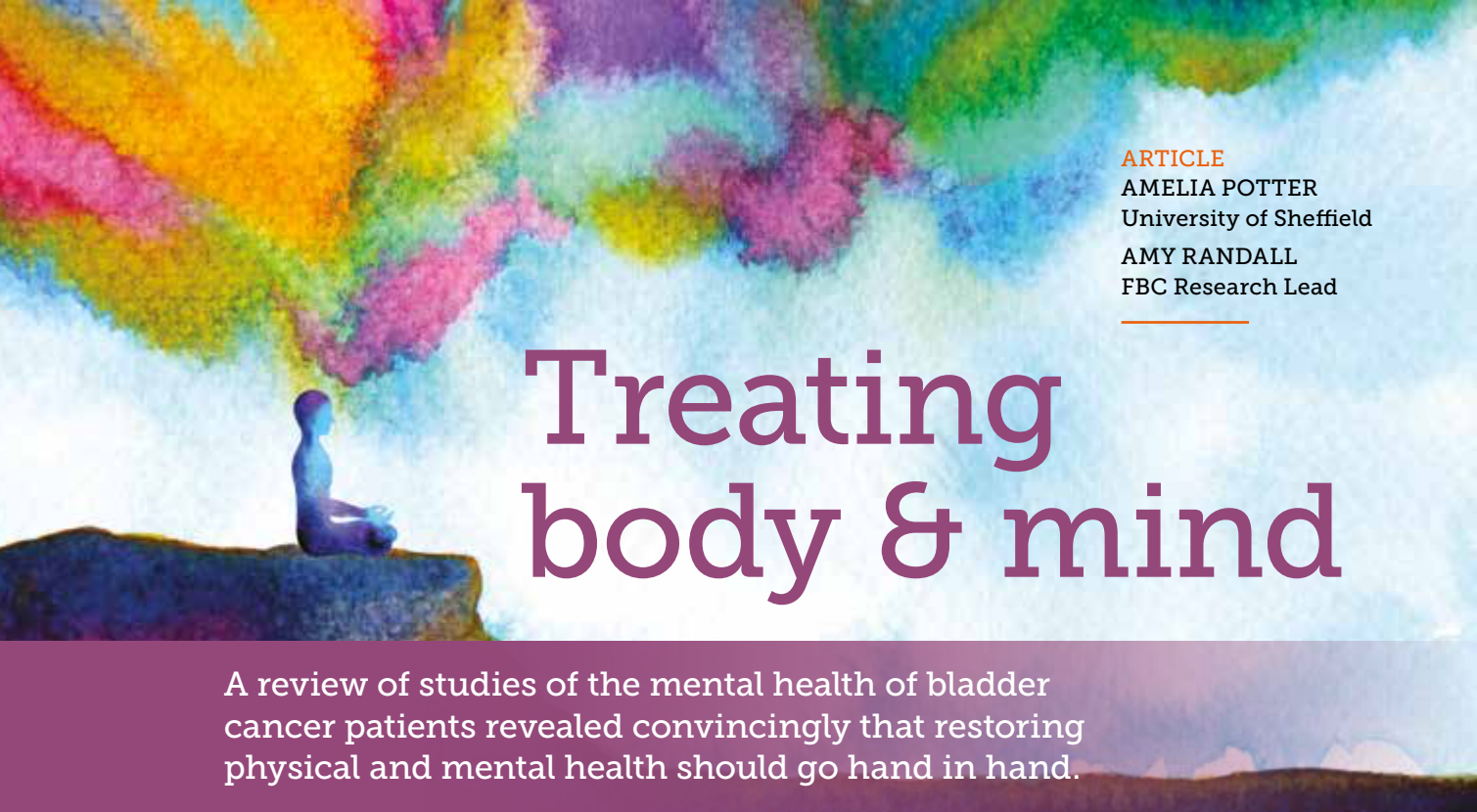
I am truly grateful for the emotional journey I have taken and that I can share some of the feelings I experienced when I was diagnosed with bladder cancer.

have to be emotionally strong and it is okay to talk about my feelings as nothing dreadful will happen. Reading the posts from the Fight Bladder Cancer forum has taught me that it is okay for me to feel a wide range of emotions and to share them. If I have a bad day I let one of my family know and tell myself that tomorrow is another day and things will be better, which they usually are. Lowering my guard has enabled me to be less harsh on myself and remember that I am human too. It has taken me a whole lifetime but the personal rewards are enormous.

Hindsight

Hindsight is a wonderful thing but I am convinced that my reactions would not have been so devastating at that time if I had the benefit of someone to talk to and to give me some emotional support. I was not aware of the kind of help that Fight Bladder Cancer now offers – in fact, little was available at the time. I just felt alone. None was offered to me until 2017 – 18 years from the original diagnosis – I was simply told I had a good, positive mental attitude, which really wasn't much help.





ARTICLE
AMELIA POTTER
University of Sheffield
AMY RANDALL
FBC Research Lead

Treating body & mind

A review of studies of the mental health of bladder cancer patients revealed convincingly that restoring physical and mental health should go hand in hand.

While there has been little research into the impact of a bladder cancer diagnosis on mental health, a 2019 review of studies concluded that poor mental health is negatively impacting bladder cancer patients.¹ And with the physical, emotional and economic demands of diagnosis, treatment and long-term follow-up, it is hardly surprising that bladder cancer patients can be prone to conditions such as depression, anxiety or even suicidal thoughts. Left untreated, distress can build up, so it is important to recognise and treat problems quickly.

This summary is based on a review of scientific articles that have researched mental health associated with the diagnosis, treatment and follow-up of both non-muscle-invasive and muscle-invasive bladder cancers. We combined our findings with the information from a series of interviews undertaken for our Exemplar study to identify the impact bladder cancer has had on patients' lives and relationships, along with the importance of accessing support. The patient quotes are from those interviews.

KEY MESSAGES

- Bladder cancer does affect many patients' mental health
- It is always okay to ask for help
- Take action and it can get better

Why bladder cancer patients are at risk

Cancer does not just affect your physical health. There are many factors that can lead mental health to deteriorate in bladder cancer patients, usually through a build up of stress and anxiety.

- the process of a bladder cancer diagnosis, invasive treatment and coping with the threat of recurrence can feel very long and lonely
- treatment can involve major surgery with its inherent risks and impact on the body
- patients may lose sexual and/or urinal function
- there are likely to be some significant physical changes, including perhaps having to learn to use a stoma and bag
- severe illness can impact relationships and you may also be worried about the people close to you
- it can be difficult to talk to others about what you are going through or you may live alone and have no one to support you

Interestingly, there was no evidence of a significant difference in mental health between individuals with non-muscle-invasive and muscle-invasive bladder cancer, suggesting the severity of the diagnosis may not have as much impact as might have been expected. Research also found no evidence of a significant difference between patients based on age, gender, race or disease stages¹.

Riding the roller coaster

The review highlighted that it is common for patients to experience a dip in mental health, with feelings of depression or anxiety, but that this often reverses as treatment progresses. For example, one study² of non-muscle-invasive bladder cancer patients found that although their mental health tended to decline after the first TURBT (an operation to remove an early tumour in the bladder), it improved after subsequent procedures, especially after the fourth operation.

Other studies 3 4 5 6 7 demonstrated that while mental health declined immediately following diagnosis, mental health then improved as time progressed, with one study showing it reverted back to normal after five years¹.

The effect on relationships

Particularly those who had been through radical surgery, which requires a long recovery and affects your sexual life, found that it affected their relationships. Several women who had had their bladder removed said that they felt they had not received adequate information but were very uncomfortable bringing up the subject of sex with their healthcare professionals. They wanted the opportunity to talk to other women who had been through the same surgery about their experience of sex following bladder removal.

WHAT SHOULD I SAY TO MY GP?

Patients often report that they find it difficult to talk about how they are feeling so mental health charity MIND has some suggestions to make it easier.

- be honest and open
- focus on how you feel
- try to explain your feelings
- don't think your problem is too small or unimportant

It can be useful before your appointment to have a think about how you would answer these questions:

- How have you been feeling lately?
- Has anything happened or changed in your life recently?
- Are you eating normally?
- How are you sleeping?

For more information you can head to mind.org.uk/findthewords or call MIND directly on 0300 123 3393.⁸

'A bit more emotional support when you are having those clinical meetings. I would have liked to have had a meeting with someone who tuned into how I was feeling emotionally.'

Finding the right solution

There are many ways to help improve mental health, whether patients are having problems after diagnosis or during or after treatment¹.

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy:** in early studies, this shows positive outcomes in treating psychological changes.
- **Pharmacotherapy:** therapy using drugs can be used to treat depression or anxiety in cancer patients.
- **Pre-habilitation programmes:** including physical therapy, counselling and addressing risk factors that can be changed. Pre-habilitation doesn't just provide mental support but also encompasses social support. This can be important because, following diagnosis and initial treatments, patients can find it difficult to work, complete jobs and socialise with others. These problems tend to improve as treatment continues.

Anyone being treated for bladder cancer will be making regular visits to their doctor or CNS. The professionals are well aware that the mental health of their patients is important, so they should be open to discussing and treating both mental and physical symptoms. Treating mental health is not only important for the patients' general well-being but it can also have an effect on how they cope with their treatment.

While some people said healthcare professionals in different areas of the UK were supportive, this was not the case for many people. Several people felt their treatment could have been improved if they had someone to talk to early on during their diagnosis and treatment.

Talking is good therapy

The ability to talk to people who have been through something similar was important to both patients and family carers. People have reported that the FBC online forum, Bladder Buddies peer mentoring and Fight Club support groups have provided a space for them to ask questions, share how they are feeling and gain understanding and emotional support.

For some, it was important to have a space to talk, separate from the people close to them.

'You need to have some sort of private way to talk, ask, process, without it becoming the central conversation in your house. If you have young children, you want things to be normal. You need to have something outside of your core living, to process and deal with it.'

SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

In some cases, severe depression and anxiety can lead to the patient having suicidal thoughts. Being aware in advance that this might happen should help patients to recognise whether deterioration in their mental health is becoming serious. If it does, they should call their GP or one of the helplines listed here to get immediate help.

Samaritans: 116 123 (for everyone)
Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM): 0800 58 58 58 (for men)
Papyrus: 0800 068 41 41 (for under 35s)

More information

The availability of information leaflets for patients and their families was also an area which the patients said would have helped them. While some people did report receiving good information leaflets, many did not and it was reported that little is available for carers and family members which might help them talk to their family member with bladder cancer.

FBC are publishing a series of Patient Information Booklets on all aspects of bladder cancer (see page 9). Ask your CNS or visit fightbladdercancer.co.uk/booklets

Advice and support

As well as *Fight* magazine, Fight Bladder Cancer has many supporting initiatives, including a private online forum, a Bladder Buddy service, an e-newsletter, Fight Club support groups, a website, Facebook page and Twitter feed (see page 23). You can find out more at fightbladdercancer.co.uk

Everyone's experience and needs will be different, therefore we must improve on the range of services already available to provide support for people affected by bladder cancer and their families, such as signposting and accessibility so that patients and their families can access that support early on in their cancer journey. Such advances would have a positive impact on overall outcomes.

You could also approach a charity called Maggie's, which provides free online support during and after cancer. Maggie's staff include experienced specialist healthcare professionals who will listen to how you are feeling and answer any questions. They also offer support groups or private one-on-one or family sessions with a psychologist. There is a phone number and online community on the Maggie's website providing a space for people to share their experience and ask questions from home. maggies.org/ 0300 123 1801 enquiries@maggies.org

If you need help accessing any of the support or information mentioned, contact Fight Bladder Cancer support via the website at fightbladdercancer.co.uk on 01844 351621 or email support@fightbladdercancer.co.uk

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⁷ Li M, Wang L. The associations of psychological stress with depressive and anxiety symptoms among Chinese bladder and renal cancer patients: the mediating role of resilience. *PloS One*, 2016, **11**, e0154729
⁸ Mind, Everyone should get the right mental support from their GP, Mind, available at: <https://www.mind.org.uk/news-campaigns/campaigns/you-and-your-gp/> last accessed 28 July 2020

ARTICLE
 MELANIE COSTIN
 FBC Support Services
 Manager

Scanxiety



Meaning: A word to describe the feeling you may have at the time leading up to a scan; or when you are waiting for an appointment for your scan results; or at any of those times when thinking about a procedure turns a mainly rational brain into a mess of doubts, worries, certainties that you have a pain here, an ache there, surely some anomaly somewhere on your body. It's the time when every twinge means a recurrence, or for those of us still with our bladders, your need to sleepwalk to the toilet in the night for the eighth time must surely mean something new has grown.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is really just a form of stress. It is a feeling of fear that mainly relates to worry about what *might* happen, worrying about things going wrong, or feeling like you're in some kind of danger. Everyone experiences feelings of anxiety from time to time when they encounter an unfamiliar or maybe nerve-wracking situation. The kind of anxiety that is triggered makes us think the 'what ifs':

- **What if there is a lot of traffic and I miss my appointment?**
- **What if I can't find the urology department?**

Once the worrying situation is over, you will start to calm down and feel better – often it's an immediate feeling.

When stress ceases to be motivating

Some degree of anxiety is perfectly normal and can even be motivating as it helps us stay alert, on our toes and ready to do our best, but if the worrying situation has gone and the feeling of fear is still there or gets worse, then it can affect your ability to actually get things done, and can stop you enjoying your daily life. If you have a bladder cancer diagnosis, the feelings of anxiety can be difficult to control. With seemingly endless appointments and procedures, it can be difficult to relax our minds when there is likely to be another check-up on the horizon. Most people do find themselves in a mentally better place when they get their full diagnosis and can start a treatment plan. Going for scans, operations, results, well, you would be in the company of many of us if you didn't feel at *least* a fluttering of anxiety trying to rear its head.

Understanding why it feels like it does

For some people, however, anxiety can be harder to deal with, sometimes because it triggers underlying issues. Getting a handle on why it feels like it does can help us win some control back over our fears. Anxiety happens because a part of your brain thinks that there might be something it needs to protect you from. It then floods your body with a mix of things like oxygen, hormones and adrenaline, things that make you *stronger* and *faster*, more *alert* and *powerful*, so that basically you can fight for your life or make a run for it. **This is called the fight or flight response. It's normal and it's healthy and it's in everyone, but in people with anxiety, it can be a bit quicker to activate.**

The part of the brain (the amygdala) that just wants to keep you safe is always having to be alert, waiting to fight whatever it needs to. However, it can't always tell the difference between something that might hurt you, and something that won't hurt you, and it doesn't care – all it wants to do is keep you safe.

When there is absolutely nothing to flee from or nothing to fight, there is nothing to burn off the chemical fuel that is surging through you, so the fuel just builds up. At this point things start to happen.

- **Your breathing changes** from normal, slow breaths to short, shallow breaths. This is because your brain is telling your body to conserve oxygen and send as much as possible to your muscles so that they can get ready to run or fight. You might feel a bit breathless, find yourself talking faster and your face may go red from the blood rushing to it.



ANXIETY CAN LOOK SOMETHING LIKE THIS

There are common signs of anxiety. If you experience some of these, it doesn't mean that anxiety is a problem for you. As bladder cancer patients or carers, all of us will experience some of them – it isn't a problem, it is quite usual. Something is *only* a problem if it is causing you a problem.

- **You might feel a bit dizzy or confused** because if you don't fight or flee, the oxygen builds up in your body and the carbon dioxide drops. Your heart races to get the oxygen around your body and can feel like it's literally beating out of your chest.
- **Your arms and legs might go tense or shaky** from the fuel rushing to them to help your flight or fight.
- **You might get a bit clammy or sweaty or have cold hands** when your body starts cooling itself down to stop it from overheating in case it has to fight or flee.
- **You may end up with butterflies or feel queasy and with a dry mouth or a dodgy tummy.** This is because anything happening in your body that isn't *absolutely* essential for your survival shuts down to conserve energy until the 'danger' is dealt with. Your digestive system is one of these.
- **You can feel really upset or even angry** because this same part of your brain also controls emotions, so when it's in fight or flight mode it's switched right up to high volume.

So, everything you feel when you have anxiety is to do with your body getting ready to fight or flee.

Thoughts

- **Negative thoughts – the what-ifs:** What if I get side effects, what if treatment doesn't work, the what-ifs that can be small thoughts that grow into huge worries
- **Over worrying about physical symptoms:** Could this pain mean a recurrence? What if an ache may be a sign of something more serious?

Symptoms should *always* be mentioned to your urology team. Thoughts, however, are just thoughts; they are NOT predictions. If they come, let them come, then try to let them go.

Remember you need the zzzzz

If you are anxious, you may have difficulty sleeping, either falling asleep, or waking up and not being able to get back to sleep. When you are still and quiet and trying to relax, negative thoughts or worries will see it as an open invitation. They will basically get the party started in your head and sleeping will be almost impossible! Establish a relaxing bedtime routine and try the mindfulness or breathing exercises on the next pages.



Anxiety is so common

One in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem like anxiety and depression in any given week in England.¹ Without a doubt, someone you know or care about will also struggle with anxiety from time to time.

Anxiety has nothing to do with courage or strength

People with anxiety can be some of the strongest and bravest people you know.

Everyone experiences anxiety on some level

Anxiety exists on a scale, some people get it a lot and some people get it less, but we all experience anxiety on some level at some time in our lives.

Anxiety is a feeling, not a personality

Rest assured that, with the right care, you can overcome your anxiety.

¹ McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T. (eds.) (2016). Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult psychiatric morbidity survey 2014.

Feelings

- Fear, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed or out of control
- Dread
- Panic that seems to come from nowhere
- Feeling separate from your physical self or your surroundings
- Feeling as though you want to burst into tears
- Feeling angry

Physical reactions

- Racing heart
- Tightening in the chest
- Butterflies
- Stomach ache
- Tense muscles
- Shaking hands
- Feeling as though you are about to be sick
- Dizzy or light headed

If you experience a tummy ache, it is because we have hundreds of millions of neurons in the stomach – it is like having a brain in our stomach. Normally they are really good for our mental health, sending information

from our tummy to our brain, but when everything in there is out of balance, the messages sent back to the brain can stir anxiety. Try and cut back on the fizzy drinks and sugary foods!

Behaviours

- **You may avoid people or certain situations:** This isn't necessarily about wanting to avoid the people involved but more about wanting to avoid the anxiety that comes with it, such as a get-together or anything unfamiliar, the thought of having to answer questions or trying to avoid having to answer them
- **You may bite your nails, pull at your hair**
- **You may feel compelled to perform certain habits that don't seem to make any sense whatsoever,** such as grouping things together in even numbers, or having to touch the door handle a certain number of times before you leave the house, or checking the locks

People with anxiety tend to find all sorts of ways to make their anxiety feel smaller for a little while until it's under control.

HOW TO DEAL WITH ANXIETY

There are lots of ways to manage anxiety by strengthening the brain so it can protect you. The brain is like any other muscle in the body, it will get stronger with practice but it isn't always easy to start with.

Breathing

It's hard to believe that something as simple as breathing can help control anxiety, but actually strong, deep breathing starts the relaxation response that calms down the surge of chemicals that cause the horrible feelings of anxiety.

- It's an automatic response, so you don't need to believe it works, it just does – but you have to initiate it. Once you start slow, deep breathing, then your body will take over and do the rest.
- I was told to look at a rectangular shape, like a door, as you follow the side of the door breathe in, hold as you look across the top, then breathe out down the other side. It takes a bit of practice but it works.
- Sensations can be very helpful during anxiety, so you might try figure-of-eight breathing. Draw a figure of eight with your finger on the back of your hand. As you're drawing the first half of the eight, breathe in for three. When you get to the middle, hold your finger still for one. Then for the second half of the figure eight breathe out for three. Repeat this three or four times.
- One of my preferred methods is to imagine smelling a cup of hot chocolate. Breathe in the lovely chocolate smell for three, hold your breath for one, then blow it cool for three.

To make it easier for your brain to access the technique when you need it, practise a couple of times a day when you are feeling your calmest.

Anxiety doesn't define you. It's a feeling that will come, but it will always go.

Mindfulness

So, what is mindfulness exactly? It is about keeping our thoughts in the present and strengthening the part of the brain that calms emotions, watching your thoughts and feelings without hanging on to them for too long, because this is when we can magnify problems. Minds like to wander, especially anxious ones, and, let's face it, having a bladder cancer diagnosis to deal with will literally fill your head with thoughts, so staying in the present can take some practice.

Remember, that anxiety is driven by a brain that has been cast into the future – the 'what ifs' – and mindfulness helps to keep control of the brain, focus it on the present, and can stop it worrying about things it doesn't need to.

It can improve your concentration and help ease stress and depression. It can also stimulate the grey matter in our brain – and it's good to have more brain cells at times like these!

Some people like to reach a state of mindfulness with a breathing technique:

- Get comfortable and close your eyes
- Take notice of your breathing. How does the air feel as you breathe it in? Notice the sensation of the air, or your tummy rising and falling. Notice your heart beating

- Think about what you can hear and what you can feel outside your body. If your mind starts to wander, then focus on your breathing again

There are lots of brilliant apps that can guide you through, as well as guided meditations. Some include a map which shows you how many other people are doing it at the same time and can make you feel a little more connected. Have a search online or through your mobile App Store; there are many good free ones available.

You can also practise mindfulness, keeping your thoughts in the present, during a walk outside or even around the hospital.

- Notice the sensations, think about how the air feels on your face as you walk.
- Think about what sounds you can hear: the crunching on the path, leaves blowing.

All this may seem very small but it has a huge power to keep our thoughts in the present and stop them from wandering off into anxiety.

You can also do something creative, such as drawing. You don't have to be any good, just doing something creative can help focus your mind on the present and away from your worries and what may be upsetting you.

Exercise

The effects of exercise are amazing at helping to dispel anxiety. Our brain cells become very active and help us to think quickly, act quickly and to remember things, but sometimes they act a bit too quickly and it can set off feelings of anxiety. So, to stop these cells getting over-excited and causing us trouble, the brain has a chemical called GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid); it's the brain's calm-down chemical. When the

levels of GABA in the brain are low, there's nothing to calm the brain cells down. Exercise is a brilliant way to bring the chemicals in your brain back up to the right levels. Once the brain chemicals are back to normal levels, the symptoms of anxiety tend to disappear into the sunset.

Any activity that gets your heart going counts as exercise, and it will be different for everyone. It doesn't mean that you have to go running until you are gasping for air – unless

you want to, of course – but many of us going through procedures aren't exactly able to exercise so vigorously. A brisk 20-minute walk or ten minutes of going up and down the stairs a couple of times a day will also do it. Do whatever you can manage. Try for something you can do at least five times a week. If you really are unable to do exercise, then calming things like yoga, where you will be concentrating on your breathing, can also help.

HELP ME NOW

If someone with you is struggling to control their anxiety, you can help them by doing this easy exercise to bring their brain into the 'now' by asking them to tell you:

- Five things that they can see
- Four things that they can hear
- Three things that they can feel
- Two things they can smell
- One thing they can taste

The order doesn't matter but by the time they have tried to do all of these, then things should have calmed down somewhat.

Another trick is counting backwards from 100, or asking them to spell a word backwards. They will be focused so much on this that their brain will not have the chance to wander off.

Talking

It's common to avoid talking about how you feel, especially as you may feel that others won't understand, or that you'll be judged or considered weak. Many people feel alone with their anxiety or that people don't understand them. At the risk of generalising, men have a tendency to be less likely to feel comfortable initiating a talk about their feelings.

But you are not alone.

More people will have been where you are than you think! Pick up the phone and ring us at Fight Bladder Cancer. We can just listen, or we can talk things through, point you in the right direction, or help you to join our private forum full of people who know how it feels.



You can take back control

We now understand so much about anxiety and there are many techniques that can help you deal with it. If things seem to be getting out of hand, there is no shame in asking for help. Everyone has mental health issues from time to time, and many of us need to ask for professional help during the course of our lives. If this is the time that you need to, then don't hesitate. Your GP will be able to discuss medications that can help you; they may only be needed for a short time.

Calming those tumultuous thoughts

When Teri was diagnosed with aggressive muscle-invasive bladder cancer in May 2016, it came as a massive shock. At 60 and only recently retired, she had always been blessed with good health, kept fit and been very active. Now she was on a steep learning curve and she had two amazing companions to help her through.

ARTICLE
TERI
MORGAN
FBC Forum
Member

I've been lucky enough to have had ponies and horses all of my life. Over the years, they have brought me joy, love and companionship and have certainly taught me many a life lesson! So I suppose it was no surprise that they were to play a major role in helping me through the emotional and physical battering that comes with a cancer diagnosis. What was more of a surprise was just how much of a part that would be.

Being diagnosed with any type of cancer would have been a shock, but bladder cancer? I had never even heard of it, but I had to cope with it now, so it was on with the treatment plan, which was the fairly standard chemo and then RC. I had opted for a bag as it appeared to offer me the relatively simplest and quickest treatment option and I just wanted to get on with my life. Inevitably, there were a few hiccups on the way. First my chemo was stopped after only one cycle when an extreme reaction landed me in hospital. Then, following my RC in September 2016, I developed sepsis as a result of a bacterial infection. However, by mid October I was home and, although extremely weak, was on the road to recovery.

A racehorse and an Irish lass

At the time of my diagnosis, I had two horses. Karindi (Indi), a failed racehorse that had been with me for over 20 years, and Tanni, an Irish-bred lass I'd had for just two years. Indi had, from the start, made it very clear about her likes and dislikes and how she wanted to be treated. She was very unforgiving if things weren't to her liking, and in the early days had treated me to way more than a few white knuckle rides!



Tanni had always been kinder and much happier to engage with people than Indi ever was. Unfortunately she had not had the best start in life and at the time of my diagnosis, it was evident that her various physical and behavioural problems would mean that she was unlikely ever to be able to be ridden.

I had stopped riding as soon as I had my diagnosis; I simply didn't feel comfortable doing so knowing that there were at least three large tumours in my bladder. However, I continued to spend many hours with both 'girls'; each in their own way was an enormous source of comfort to me throughout that time. Just being with them and doing everyday things, such as grooming or walking with them, was a taste of normality that soothed and helped to calm the tumultuous thoughts and emotions that were otherwise ever-present during that horrible time.

Indi astonishes everyone

After my RC, it was no surprise to anyone who knew me that seeing 'the girls' was top of my agenda, and it wasn't long before Ian, my lovely, amazing partner, was driving me the five miles along a mainly bumpy road to the stable yard. (All I can say is, thank goodness for cushions!)

It was so good to see them both and as I buried my face in each of their manes and smelt that familiar and oh-so-comforting horsey smell, I immediately felt some of the craziness, stress and anxiety of the last few months start to slip away. Over the next few weeks my visits gradually increased and by the time I was driving again, I was back to routine daily visits.

Indi was simply amazing. After momentarily being very suspicious of this feeble me, she quickly came around and from that moment she appeared to appoint herself as my carer. She astounded me (and everyone else who knew her!) just how gentle and considerate she was. In truth I had had no idea that she was even capable of it.

Back on board

Fast forward four months to one late afternoon in what was left of the winter sunshine. Indi was nibbling the grass verges as we wandered in from the field when I found myself looking longingly at her lovely, broad back. I became aware that she had stopped eating and was looking intently at me. As our eyes met, we both seemed to know that it was time for the next step and, before I knew it, I was standing on the mounting block with Indi alongside. She stood quietly and calmly while I somewhat hesitantly clambered onto her saddle-less back and then very slowly and

tentatively asked her to take a couple of steps. I was back on board – and boy did it feel good.

We continued, slowly but surely, building up my strength and confidence until, sadly, last September, she lost her life as a result of colic. I was with her to the end, and although deeply upsetting, it was the very least I could do for this incredible mare who had done so much to help me move on from such a traumatic time in my life.

As mischievous as ever

As for Tanni, well she, too, played a significant part in my recovery. Unlike Indi, she continued just being her own mischievous self. Despite the emotional and physical trauma she'd experienced previously in her short life, her enthusiasm and her delight with life continued to be a joy and she invariably lifted my spirits with her antics. (It took me weeks to convince her that the bag I now had tucked away in front of my right hip did NOT contain any treats!)

After my RC, she became my regular walking companion as I slowly built up my strength and stamina. As we gradually increased the distance, we both started to become stronger and the bond between us steadily grew.

Against all odds

I had no idea at the time that this was laying such a solid foundation, that against all the odds, she would eventually be able to be ridden. Whilst it has certainly not been plain sailing, and I continue to take things very slowly with her, she has continued to progress to the point that we now ride out regularly and do lots of other fun things together, such as horse agility. She has recently started going over some (very) small jumps, which she approaches with her usual enthusiasm and joie de vivre. She continues to be a real inspiration to me and there is no doubt in my mind that both she and Indi certainly helped me through some very difficult times.

After my RC, she became my regular walking companion as I slowly built up my strength and stamina. As we gradually increased the distance, we both started to become stronger and the bond between us steadily grew.