

DEALING WITH FEELINGS

A serious-illness diagnosis can affect your day-to-day life and cause emotional strain for both the individual and the entire family system. Life Vincent Pallotti Hospital Social Worker **Lauren Smith** has ideas of how you and your family can better cope



1 Try to avoid statements like 'I know how you feel', 'Everything will be okay' and 'You are a strong person; you will get through this'. Even if you have the best intentions, these statements are not helpful. You might also want to consider asking, 'How are you *coping* today?' instead of 'How are you?' This opens the channels of communication and might elicit a response other than 'I'm fine.'

2 When you don't know what to say, offer a hug, find comfort in silence and change the topic – not everything needs to revolve around the diagnosis.

3 Allow yourself the time and space to grieve the loss, cry and be angry, and work through your emotions. Remember that each person grieves differently, so for you it could mean crying and for someone else it could be talking with a friend. Whatever it is, honour your emotions.

4 Get centred by practising the STOP technique. Stop. Take a breath. Observe your feelings. Proceed. And do it all in love and acceptance of yourself. Mindfulness meditation can also play a crucial role in coping with emotions linked to serious illness. This practice has been known to improve emotional regulation, reduce stress and have a positive effect on wellbeing.

5 Knowledge is power when so much is unknown and anxiety is heightened. When you see doctors, ask clear, logical questions and have someone write them down, along with the doctor's answers, so that you can consult those notes later when you feel calmer.

6 Start a bucket list and include people who are close to you; this allows everyone to be part of a journey that includes memory making and finding meaning during a heartsore time.

7 Take care of yourself: make sure to eat well, get enough sleep and explore your creative side. Great ideas are art therapy, music therapy, keeping a journal and finding opportunities to laugh.

8 Getting help is a strength not a weakness, and medical social workers are a good starting point to help you and your family navigate this process. Whether you need practical or emotional support, don't be afraid to ask for help. ■

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Lauren Smith is a registered social worker in private practice. She consults at Life Vincent Pallotti Hospital and in the Cape Winelands. She is a board member of the South African Oncology Social Workers' Forum and has a passion for palliative care.