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Counselling for Individuals and Families coping with serious illness

Upon starting to write this article, I thought very deeply about what I wanted to actually convey to the reader: I considered writing about some of the various treatments as well as listing many possible illnesses, having gone through that process I came to understand and realise that my desire to write this article was to convey my passion whilst striving to truly understand and support my clients in the best possible way, accompanying them whilst they are going through some of the most difficult emotions and physical demands of their lives.

Serious illness of all types can be very much a family problem, and fraught with a myriad of issues: the challenges of coping with cancer may reverberate through the patient's close and extended family and this might make it difficult for individuals to communicate with each other openly.

Illness can affect families in a number of different ways – most obviously, the shared crisis; sometimes family members' emotions not discussed and needs not met possibly resulting in problems which may then remain unresolved.

Being given choice, therapeutic options can empower those who are experiencing serious illness, helping them through the anxiety and trauma that is experienced after a formal diagnosis.

“Now that my treatment was demanding less of me physically and psychologically, and my schedule was becoming more predictable and manageable, I was starting to have the time and mental energy to look beyond the immediate. I couldn't think clearly though – a fog would descend whenever I tried to think about my situation. I yo-yoed between denial and tentative acknowledgement of my predicament. It was a miserable experience” (Kate Carr 2004)

John Diamond spoke of liberation, in the face of possible terminal disease when he wrote:

“The rule is – and the liberating thing about life-threatening diseases is that they allow one to make up definitive rules about them on the fly – that any response to the news of one's own imminent death is a legitimate one” (John Diamond 1999)

Counselling can play an enormously supportive role to both individuals and families struggling with Cancer or indeed with all serious illness at all stages, through diagnosis, treatment, and beyond – whether it may up to the point of death, or indeed having survived the disease, and coping with short- or long-term side effects of treatment. Counselling can offer clients the opportunity to discuss the experience, either individually, as a couple or as a family.

In spite of the amount of medical help now available for cancer and other serious and chronic illness, my frequently find through my work that some families and individuals often feel isolated and helpless; being given the opportunity to express their feelings with a trained and experienced practitioner about living with life threatening illness, can be very supportive at an extremely frightening and traumatic time in their lives.

Kate Carr (2004) "It's Not Like That, Actually"; p.80

John Diamond (1999) C Because cowards get cancer too; p.38