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EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book. (Psalm 56:8 NLT)

We know we will die someday, but it is always a shock to face it when it becomes a reality. The words cancer, Alzheimer's, advanced heart failure, or any life-threatening illness can stop you in your tracks. There may be spiritual turmoil within the family. Questions arise such as: "Why did God let this happen?" "Where is He now?" You may feel angry with God. Though the illness may be treatable for a while, the thought of dying is overwhelming. Perhaps you have been given an estimated time, or you may be facing unpleasant treatment. Hopefully, the disease is one that can be cured, or at least you may expect a time of remission.

In any case, your life has changed. You are on a new journey now. It feels like a solitary journey, but, really, it's not. As John Donne wrote nearly four hundred years ago: "No man is an island unto himself." The Bible doesn't say we will not endure hardship, but it does say God will never leave us or forsake us. We were never meant to walk through life and death alone. This experience will affect everyone who loves you and cares for you. It may affect those who come after you, even for generations.

Living with a life-threatening illness is usually an intense experience. Sometimes emotions can swirl together like an ocean wave, tossing you around and making you feel you are going crazy! This is normal. Lifelong coping

mechanisms may suddenly start failing. It is frightening because you have never felt this way before. Identifying the usual causes of common emotions helps to normalize the experience.

Here are some common emotions:

FEAR



Fear is probably your first reaction to the news. It can hit you suddenly, making you feel cold or numb. Sounds may fade away as if you cannot hear very well. Even the thoughts in your mind may be lost. You feel you are in a surreal dream. How do you tell your family, your children, your spouse? And then there's the question of why. It is so unfair. We cry out to God, but we get no answers.

As you come out of the fog, there is a need to regain control. This may happen through telling your medical story or seeking information about your illness, or you might simply be in denial. For some time, you might go about your daily life as usual until the moment the truth strikes you. Initially, you might just want time alone to emotionally grasp the situation before discussing it with others or dealing with their reactions. Some family and friends want to gather during such times. As everyone returns to his or her usual daily routines, there will be quiet times alone.

You may have physical symptoms that limit your ability to carry out some of your family or work duties. Perhaps you may have to reduce your work hours resulting in a reduction of income or a change of insurance benefits. Changes in family roles and differing expectations may occur. Your family members may need to juggle their own schedules to assist you.

Kay was a forty-one-year-old wife and stay-at-home mother of two small children when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her husband and sister went with her for a consultation with the chemotherapist and radiation oncologist, while grandma stayed with the children. Together they were able to get their medical questions answered and were relieved how patient the doctors were. They began to understand the demands of medical procedures and treatments. They left with a list of resource staff and services such as

children's counselors, social workers, and a nurse who taught classes about the treatments she would undergo. They went home to meet with friends and family to learn how they might help her with things like driving her to treatments, helping with childcare, and doing regular household chores. Kay was feeling a bit overwhelmed. She thanked everyone for their support but excused herself to read her Bible and pray and just cry. However, she was looking forward to the next day when she would meet with her friend Jane Marie, a breast cancer survivor. Her husband, Frank, felt very comforted knowing his family offered their support too. He scheduled an appointment to have coffee with his pastor the next day to share his feelings and ask for prayer.

People's lives usually revolve around work, family, church communities, and social activities making up the foundation of their emotional support system. Disrupting this support can have a devastating emotional impact.

Family members and caregivers can feel many feelings, such as fear, grief, and guilt but may be more reluctant to express these because of a sense of responsibility and wanting to "be strong" for the ill person. Not everyone in the family will react alike. One person may be overwhelmed with grief, while others feel fear but can function with everyday activities. A teenager may act as if nothing is going on within the family but can be very scared. These different reactions can sometimes create impatience among family members if they are not sensitive to what is going on underneath.

Fear may come and go throughout your illness but is usually the most intense in the beginning. There are a variety of specific fears such as fear of the unknown, of physically being in pain, and of the actual dying process. There can be fear of discussing death, of end-of-life decisions, and fear of being dependent on others. Fear is *not* a sin or sign of weakness. Believers are not immune from the fear of dying. Even Jesus felt fear as He faced His own death. You may be afraid to be afraid! You may fear this is a sign of weakness or lack of faith. You may be afraid that you might be giving in to the disease.

Fear thou not; for I am with thee be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness. (Isaiah 41:10 KJV)

ANGER

Anger is a feeling many are afraid to express, and yet it is a normal response. You might feel the situation is unfair. Maybe friends or family have let you down, or medical information is disappointing. Sometimes a person may be afraid of being with someone who is angry, whether it is the ill person or a family member. Just listening to the angry feelings a person expresses will make him or her feel much better. Simply listen and don't try to reason with the person. At times, gently encouraging the person to identify their fears can be helpful. Keep in mind that anger can be a symptom of depression. For the Christian, we may fear that when we are angry with God, He will punish us. However, He knows our feelings, so we might as well acknowledge them to Him. Be honest with God. It is better than turning away from Him.

Chuck's story. "The doctor came out after operating on my wife and said they could not remove all the cancer. He said it was basically everywhere. She would have six months—maybe a year. I headed for the elevator. The doors closed, and I was alone. I clenched my fists and shook them to the heavens and screamed, 'Why Lord? Why her? She is such a wonderful person!'"

GRIEF



Grief and loss can be felt by anticipating the separation from loved ones. You may grieve over the need to leave a career or a job you love, or the need to cut back on family activities. You may feel sad when you think about all the family plans, career possibilities, and personal goals that might not become a reality. Eventually, this sadness may subside as a plan of care becomes established, and hope becomes more defined. Don't be afraid to cry. This is the body's natural way to cope by reducing the internal pressure that builds up inside. A support group may also be helpful.

SUICIDAL FEELINGS

Wishing you could die or having suicidal feelings is not uncommon, especially if the illness is exceedingly difficult. However, it is a warning sign that should never be ignored. *If you are feeling suicidal, tell someone right away!* Although, suicidal feelings usually get better over time, there may be underlying medical, pharmacological, or psychological issues that can be treated. Contact your doctor or family member right away. There is hope.

Therefore, is my spirit overwhelmed within me; my heart within me is desolate. (Psalm 143:4 KJV)

God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So, we will not fear when earthquakes come and the mountains crumble into the sea. Let the oceans roar and foam. Let the mountains tremble as the waters surge! (Psalm 46:1–3 NLT)

GUILT

Guilt is a difficult emotion often filled with “what ifs.” It can stem from anxiety and fears. It can be realistic or, at other times, be unfounded. You may feel guilt for ignoring early symptoms, or you may have had certain life habits—smoking, for example—that contributed to your risk of getting sick. You may feel guilty about becoming a burden, causing emotional pain for the family, or depleting family savings.

Guilt on the part of the family member may be from not seeing symptoms sooner, not being able to help more, or having to make certain medical decisions. There can be unresolved feelings of guilt from the past such as poor life choices, mistakes, or even crimes. The guilt may be from events and decisions from a previous death of a loved one. Sometimes guilt can come from not being able to reconcile a relationship. There are always things we can find in ourselves, or in our past, that cause us guilt. Fortunately, our Lord’s grace covers all our sins!

ANXIETY

Anxiety is a common response to a serious diagnosis. Often people feel a loss of control. It might seem like the illness is controlling everything—time, relationships, and emotions. This comes because there are so many unknown factors. As details about the illness become clear, the anxiety level may go down.

First, it is important for each person to be aware of his or her own signs of stress to recognize when it is becoming impactful. Second, find those interventions that help reduce stress and anxiety for you. These can be in the form of exercise, prayer, journaling, music, talking with others in a support group, or individual counseling.

Needing to go to more and more medical appointments can cause chaos. Interjecting them into an already busy family schedule only adds more stress, especially when school-aged children are involved. As a medical plan of care is agreed upon, and as there is some help with daily life or even being able to go back to work, the loss of control will lessen.

We believe that the end of life is an important time to God. It is part of His plan for humankind—to hold society together, to pass on the blessing from one generation to another, and to create a social conscience about the value of life. He is actively involved. It is His desire to heal and reconcile families. Sometimes He heals the body too. God uses this time to bring us and others closer to Himself. Like the instruments in a symphony that “weave” music together to produce a magnificent sound, God uses many people and circumstances to bring attention to His purposes during this experience. He wants to heal the soul, strengthen families, and bring some to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. We call this phenomenon “God’s symphony orchestra.”

God has a plan for us for every day. He wants each of us to have a good life and death. This is so powerful that we believe that the end of life might be *the most* important time of a person’s life. It can be an experience that will change whole families for generations. God uses the end of life for good. We do not lose our value and worth in His eyes ever, even if we become sick or incapacitated!

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Ephesians 3:20–21 NIV)