BETWEEN APPOINTMENTS™

The First 90 Days

What No One Hands You After a Cancer Diagnosis

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START HERE

Find the Part That Matches the Day You Are Having

You do not need to read this book in order. Start with the part that matches the day you are having.

I have just been diagnosed: Chapters 1 and 2

My brain is not taking things in: Chapters 3, 5 and 6

I do not know what needs doing first: Chapters 4 and 5

I am waiting for results or a plan: Chapter 7

I have been referred to palliative care and I am frightened by what that means: Chapter 6

The fear has caught up with me: Chapters 8 and 12

Treatment is becoming real: Chapters 9, 10 and 11

I am exhausted: Chapters 10 and 17

I need support that actually helps: Chapters 13 and 15

I am worried about work, money or identity: Chapter 14

Good news has not made me feel safe: Chapter 18

Everyone else seems to be moving on: Chapter 19

I need to think about what comes next: Chapter 20

I am supporting someone with cancer: Chapters 13, 15 and 19

If you are in immediate danger, feel unable to keep yourself safe or believe you may harm yourself, use urgent local emergency or crisis support and involve another person now. Chapter 12 can help you prepare for difficult days, but it does not replace urgent professional help.

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The First 24 Hours

There is a peculiar kind of silence after life-changing news, although it isn't always an actual silence. The doctor may still be talking. Somebody beside you may be asking sensible questions. A printer might be spitting out appointment sheets. Chairs scrape, phones ring, nurses come and go. Yet something in your head has gone quiet because one sentence has landed and the rest of the conversation now has to find its way around it.

Cancer.

Maybe you expected it. Maybe you absolutely didn't. Maybe you had known for weeks that something was wrong and the diagnosis still hit with a force you couldn't have prepared for. However it arrived, the first 24 hours aren't the time to understand your whole future. That sounds obvious until you are living them, because the mind starts running ahead almost immediately.

What stage is it? Has it spread? What treatment will I need? Will I be able to work? What do I tell my children? How long will this take? Am I going to die?

You can move from a hospital chair to the imagined end of your life in less than a minute. That isn't weakness. It is what uncertainty does when the stakes suddenly feel enormous. The mind hates an empty space and, given half a chance, will fill it with the worst thing it can find.

Your first job isn't to answer every question. It is to separate what you actually know from what fear is adding.

What You Know, and What You Don't

Facts can become surprisingly slippery in those first hours. You may remember one sentence perfectly and lose the next six. You may remember the doctor's expression but not the name of the scan, or remember hearing the word treatment without having any idea whether it was supposed to start next week or after another test.

Before you begin researching, predicting or explaining, write down the simplest version of what you were actually told. Not what you think it means, and not what somebody online says it usually means. Just the facts as you have them.

For example:

• I have been diagnosed with cancer.

• The doctors have told me where they believe it started.

• I am waiting for a scan.

• My next appointment is on Thursday.

• I have been given a number to call if I have questions.

That is enough. Beside it, write down what you don't know yet. Maybe you don't know the full stage, the treatment plan, how long treatment will last, what work will look like or what any of this means six months from now.

This can feel almost too simple to be useful, but it isn't. Fear has a habit of turning unanswered questions into conclusions. Writing "I don't know yet" puts the question back where it belongs: unanswered, not answered badly.

The Pressure to Do Something

A diagnosis creates an enormous urge to act. You may want to research everything, change your diet, buy supplements, tell everybody, tell nobody, sort out work, cancel plans, book a second opinion, search for the best hospital in the world or decide, before you even know the treatment plan, that you are going to beat it. You may also decide, just as quickly, that everything is over.

The urge makes sense. Doing something feels better than sitting beside uncertainty. The problem is that movement and progress aren't always the same thing.

Some decisions really are time-sensitive and your medical team will tell you when something needs to happen quickly. A great many others only feel urgent because your mind has just been handed the biggest problem it can imagine. You are allowed to pause. You are allowed to say, "I need to think about that," or "Can we come back to this tomorrow?" You can ask somebody to write something down. You can also ask one of the most useful questions in the whole early period: "What is the next thing that actually needs to happen?"

Not the next ten things. The next thing.

Choose One Person

One of the stranger things about frightening news is how quickly you can find yourself looking after everybody else. A parent cries, so you reassure them. A partner panics, so you become calm. A friend wants every detail, so you repeat the appointment from beginning to end. Somebody tells you to stay positive and suddenly you are performing optimism because comforting them is easier than explaining yourself.

You don't need to become the communications department for your own cancer.

For the first day, choose one person if you can. It doesn't necessarily have to be the person who loves you most. Choose somebody useful: somebody who can listen without making you manage them, remember things you forget, sit in silence without rushing to fill it and resist solving problems you have not asked them to solve.

The rest of the announcements can wait. There is no prize for telling everybody efficiently.

Be Careful With the Internet Tonight

You are probably going to search. I did, and most people do. Telling somebody not to Google cancer is about as useful as telling them not to think about it. Still, there is a difference between looking for a piece of information and disappearing down a hole at midnight.

Search results don't know your pathology, your scans, your age, your general health, your treatment options or what your medical team has actually seen. Statistics are especially easy to misuse when you are trying to turn a population of people into a prediction about one frightened person sitting on a sofa with a phone in their hand.

If you search tonight, give the search a job. Look up the name of the test you were told about. Find the official patient information for a treatment that has actually been mentioned. Write down an unfamiliar term so you can ask about it later. Then stop. You don't need to research every possible future before bed. Tonight isn't an exam.

The Ordinary Things Still Count

Try to eat something and drink something. Take the medication you are supposed to take. Charge your phone and put the next appointment somewhere you won't lose it. Sleep if you can, and rest if you can't.

Those things can feel almost insultingly small beside a cancer diagnosis, but they aren't. When life suddenly becomes enormous, ordinary actions give the day edges. You may have very little control over what happens next medically, but you can still put a glass of water beside the bed, send somebody a message saying, "I don't need advice, I just don't want to be on my own with this tonight," or decide that nobody else is getting an update until morning.

Small does not mean meaningless.

What Not to Decide Today

Unless something genuinely requires an immediate decision, be cautious about making permanent choices while you are still absorbing the diagnosis. You don't need to resign from work, cancel every plan, tell the entire family, decide what sort of patient you are going to be or promise anybody that you will stay positive. You certainly don't need to become brave by bedtime.

1. The First 24 Hours

There will be time for plans and questions. There will be time to get angry, frightened, organised, hopeful, practical, exhausted and probably several of those things in the same afternoon. Today has a much smaller job: get to tomorrow with the important information intact and at least one person knowing what is happening.

For the Next 24 Hours

- 1. Write down what you know.
- 2. Write down what you are still waiting to learn.
- 3. Record the next appointment, test or call.
- 4. Tell one person who can genuinely support you.
- 5. Let everything else wait unless your medical team has told you it can't.

If your head is full, reduce everything to this:

That is enough for today. The first 24 hours aren't a test of courage. They are simply the first 24 hours.

BETWEEN APPOINTMENTS™

THE BAD DAY SHEET

A simple support sheet for the days that feel too heavy

Why this sheet exists

Some days are just bad. Not meaningful. Not inspiring. Not a lesson. Not something you need to turn into strength.

This sheet is not here to fix the day. It is here to help you get through the next small part of it.

What is actually happening today?

Today feels hard because _____

The hardest part is _____

My body feels _____

My mind feels _____

The thought I keep returning to _____

What I need most right now _____

Lower the demand

A bad day is not the day to judge your whole life, measure your strength, make big decisions, or pretend you are fine to make other people comfortable.

In the next hour, I can

■ Drink something

■ Eat something small

■ Take medication as directed

■ Sit somewhere more comfortable

■ Rest without explaining myself

■ Message one person

■ Stop searching online

■ Do one ordinary thing

■ Leave something until tomorrow

Check the basics

■ Have I had water?

■ Have I eaten something?

■ Have I taken medication as directed?

■ Have I changed position or rested?

■ Have I told someone I am having a hard day?

■ Have I contacted my medical team if symptoms are severe, sudden, frightening, or worsening?

What can wait?

Messages _____

Work _____

Admin _____

Family updates _____

Future appointments _____

Long-term decisions _____

Other people's emotions _____

Explaining myself _____

A message I can send

I am having a hard day today and I do not really have the energy to talk. I just wanted someone to know.

What would make today less hard?

One thing for my body _____

One thing for my mind _____

One thing that may reduce the noise _____

One thing I can ask someone else to do _____

One thing I can stop carrying today _____

When to contact someone

If symptoms are severe, sudden, frightening, or getting worse, contact your medical team, out-of-hours service, emergency department, or local emergency number. If you feel at risk of harming yourself or do not feel safe, contact emergency services, a crisis support service, or someone you trust immediately.

A note for later

You do not need a speech about strength. You only need to get through the next piece of time. Sometimes just being there, exactly as you are, is all the strength available. And it still counts.