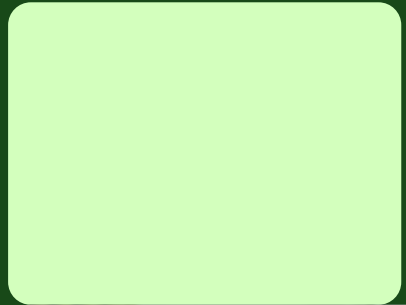


# Your mental health and stem cell transplant

## A Guide



At Anthony Nolan we take great care to provide up-to-date and accurate facts about stem cell transplant. We hope the information here will help you to look after your wellbeing.

Each transplant centre will do things differently, so this booklet is just a general guide. It isn't intended to replace advice from your doctor and transplant team.

Please speak to your transplant team for more details about your own situation, as they will be able to give you personalised, specific advice.

### Ordering more copies

If you'd like to order more copies of this guide, please get in touch with us on [patientinfo@anthohnolan.org](mailto:patientinfo@anthohnolan.org)

© Anthony Nolan 2026

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted without permission in writing from Anthony Nolan.

All trademarks and brand names referred to are acknowledged as belonging to their respective owners.

If you have any questions or comments about this resource, or would like information on the evidence used to produce it, please email: [patientinfo@anthohnolan.org](mailto:patientinfo@anthohnolan.org)

The information contained in this booklet is correct at the time of going to print (March 2026). We plan to review this publication within three years, by March 2029. For updates or the latest information, visit [anthohnolan.org](http://anthohnolan.org)



Anthony Nolan is a registered charity No 803716/SC038827

#### This publication was reviewed by:

- Jennie Simcock, Specialist Occupational Therapist, National Stem Cell Transplant Unit, Glasgow
- Dr Clare McGowan and Dr Kathleen McHugh, Consultant Clinical Psychologists, National Bone Marrow Transplant Service, Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, Glasgow
- Anthony Nolan Patients and Families Network

**Authors:** Holly Tarbet and Jonathan Kay

**Editor:** Hannah Harper

**Designer:** Jamie Cross

## What's in this booklet?

Your stem cell transplant will affect many aspects of your life, including your emotions and the way you feel.

This booklet highlights some of these experiences and offers advice on how to cope with your mental health. The information and advice can help both you and people who care for you on your stem cell transplant journey.

To write this booklet, we got guidance and advice from healthcare professionals as well as people who have had a transplant. They shared their experiences with us to help you see that other people have come through similar difficulties.

If you need to ask us any questions, or you would like some more advice, please get in touch with the Anthony Nolan Patient Services team at [patientinfo@anthohnolan.org](mailto:patientinfo@anthohnolan.org) or **0303 303 0303**.



## Contents

Key questions	6
Your mental health before during and after transplant	10
What if my transplant doesn't work?	13
Body image and mental health	22
Taking control of your recovery and living well	27
Tips to improve your mental health and wellbeing	40
Talking about your mental health	44
What is talking therapy?	50
What if talking therapy isn't for me?	56
Support from Anthony Nolan	60
Other useful contacts	62
Your journal	65

## Key questions

### How can this booklet help me?

This booklet can help you by explaining how your stem cell transplant might affect your mental health. It covers topics like:

- emotions you might feel
- concerns about body image
- effects on your family or social life.

It offers advice on talking about difficult feelings and explains how therapy can make them easier to cope with. It also covers other ways charities and organisations can offer mental health support.

### Is it normal to feel like this?

Having a stem cell transplant will probably be one of the most challenging experiences you'll have to go through. There's no right or wrong way to feel, but difficult feelings are completely normal.

Many people have difficulties with mental health for months, and even years, after their transplant. But there are lots of different ways you can learn to cope. Everyone has a unique experience of recovery and will go through a huge range of emotions throughout the transplant journey.

### How will I cope?

It can be difficult to know how best to cope with a period of poor mental health. You might want to think about things you tried before to help you through hard times – you might find these ideas useful again now.

Lots of us try out different techniques to see what works, but you don't have to try anything you don't feel comfortable with. You can use some of our suggestions in this booklet as a starting point.

### What will work best?

When it comes to working out your own coping mechanisms, it might involve some trial and error. But try to trust your instincts. You might also find different things work at different times. Only you will know what feels best for your mental health.

### How will I know when to ask for extra help?

You don't have to wait until you're struggling with mental health before asking for help. Talking about what's on your mind can help you come to terms with your situation and might stop something turning into a bigger problem. If you don't have anyone to talk to, we've listed useful contacts on **page 60–64**.

### How do I find a therapist?

If you'd like to talk to a therapist, you can get a referral from your GP or medical team. If you live in England, you can also refer yourself through NHS Talking Therapies. Visit [nhs.uk/talkingtherapies](https://www.nhs.uk/talkingtherapies)

You can also apply to get support from Anthony Nolan's free Telephone Emotional Support Service. Get more information at [anthonynolan.org/TESS](https://www.anthonynolan.org/TESS)

We have more information about talking therapies on **page 50**.



## Your mental health before, during and after transplant

You'll experience a range of emotions at every stage of your stem cell transplant journey. However, some emotions, thoughts and feelings might feel difficult to deal with.

Throughout your transplant journey, there will probably be times when you're worried, times when you're scared and times when you want to cry. But not everyone will go through these feelings in the same order or for the same amount of time.

**The most important thing to remember is that you are not alone.** These feelings are completely normal and you can get support.

**“Nothing is going to be plain sailing. You're not going to travel in a linear direction, you're going to have twists and turns and ups and downs. Sometimes they'll even blow you off course.”**

DARREN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

### You might feel...

#### Sad and low

Feeling sad or low after all the fear and uncertainty of this life-changing process is completely understandable. These feelings often pass as you start to recover. But if they come back regularly for a few days at a time, it could be a sign you're experiencing depression if these feelings:

- interfere with your daily life
- don't go away after a couple of weeks
- come back over and over again for a few days at a time.

#### Anger and grief

Along with sadness, anger is one of the 'stages of grief' we go through before accepting a situation and moving on. Grief doesn't always involve losing someone close to you. After a life-changing event like a transplant, you might experience grief for the life you used to have. Anyone who needs a transplant has probably asked themselves 'why me?' at some point.

#### Isolated

When we feel like nobody understands what we're going through, this can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Living alone or having limited support from friends and family can bring up similar feelings.

Staying in protective isolation directly after transplant can be a very challenging time, both physically and mentally. For information and advice, visit [anthonynolan.org/isolation](https://www.anthonynolan.org/isolation)

## Anxious

Going through a period of uncertainty and not being able to plan for the future can make us feel anxious. Some people might also experience a common mental health problem called 'generalised anxiety disorder'.

## Loss

You might feel like you've lost the freedom you had before your transplant, especially if you've not gone back to work or had to give up certain hobbies. You might also worry about losing the medical support you had in hospital as you move from treatment into recovery.

## Hopeful

On a more positive note, you might feel an increased sense of determination and resilience. When your treatment and recovery are going well, you feel great. Self-managing parts of your recovery, like your diet and exercise, can help you feel as if you're regaining control of your situation. This sense of progress can lead to thoughts of hope for the future.

Any of these difficult feelings could be caused by problems that may or may not be in your control. If you're concerned about how your transplant might affect your day-to-day life, like returning to work or your finances, we have lots of information to help. Your medical team should also be able to give you specific advice.

You can get more information on our website. Visit [anthohnolan.org/recovery](https://anthohnolan.org/recovery)

## What if my transplant doesn't work?

Despite your best efforts and the support of your medical team, family and friends, your stem cell transplant might not work. This can deeply affect your mental health and bring up more difficult feelings.

All the feelings you experienced at the start of your journey might come back, maybe even stronger than before. During this time, it's important to get support for yourself and the people close to you.

Not everyone will be able to have further treatment for their condition. Either the risk is too high, or they might decide to stop. Even when this is the case, lots of things will be available to support you in this final stage. This is what we call 'palliative care'.

Palliative care aims to relieve pain and other symptoms. It's a key part of end-of-life care that can provide emotional, physical, practical and spiritual support to help come to terms with facing death. Whether you make this choice, or it's made for you, it can be really difficult to face.

Sometimes you might want to talk with somebody who isn't a close friend or family member. You can always try out a few options until you find somebody you feel comfortable with.

If you'd like to speak to a therapist, you can find details on **pages 62–64**. Or you can find self-care tips and ideas for coping with your mental health on **page 40**.

For information about why a stem cell transplant might not work, visit [anthohnolan.org/transplant-failed](https://anthohnolan.org/transplant-failed)



“During stem cell transplant I was stable, but they stopped medical treatment of my mental health. Unfortunately, after transplant I had a relapse. Life has been challenging after transplant with mental health challenges, as I had so many breakdowns since.”

DIANA (RIGHT) WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

## Managing your relationships and mental health

Before, during and after a stem cell transplant, you'll go through a period of relying on people around you. Getting used to this lack of independence can feel tough, particularly if you can't support others like you used to.

As you progress through your journey, you might find:

- people react to you differently
- the dynamics of your relationships change
- the roles and responsibilities in your family environment have shifted
- it's more difficult to deal with other people's problems during this time.

**However you're feeling, these types of experiences are completely normal and understandable.**

## Partners and significant others

For some partners, the stem cell transplant journey might strengthen their relationship as they support each other through tough times. But the worry, stress and anxiety surrounding stem cell transplant could also make the relationship feel more complicated.

If you're finding things difficult and feel that your partner might need some help, try to:

- make sure you talk honestly about your feelings to avoid misunderstandings
- help your partner open up about their feelings if they seem distant
- have a chat with your medical team, who can put you in touch with a counsellor to talk to, either with or without your partner.

Remember that they might try to hide their concerns because they don't want to burden you with extra worries.

**“Do we decide to have kids or not? It has to be a very conscious decision now and also, we don't even know if IVF will work, because the speed at which my treatment had to start meant I couldn't get my sperm frozen until after I'd started chemo. If it didn't work, that would be crushing.”**

DAN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

For information and advice about sex after transplant, learn more on our website at [anthonymolan.org/sex](https://anthonymolan.org/sex)

## Family and relatives

Your home routines are likely to change a lot during your time in hospital and while you recover. You might find:

- you don't feel able to do all the family activities together that you used to, especially with younger children
- people who you live with, or your extended family, might need to take on responsibilities they haven't done before.

You can involve them in discussions about how things might change and how they can help. A lot of the time they might be trying to stay strong for you, but your family will also have fears about the future. Try to talk openly about your concerns and invite them to talk about theirs. It will help you support each other.

If you have **parents** supporting you, even as an adult, you might feel them becoming overprotective during your recovery. If you find yourself arguing with them more often, try to understand how to negotiate, compromise and try to see their point of view.

If you have **siblings** supporting you, they might feel disappointed or frustrated they weren't able to be your donor. Younger siblings might feel like they are unimportant and a little forgotten, especially if other family members need to focus on you and your recovery.

If you have **young children** or **grandchildren**, it's generally a good idea to let them know what's happening and what a stem cell transplant might involve, but in language they will understand.

Some of us have big families including **aunties, uncles, grandparents, cousins, step siblings, parents-in-law, close family friends** and so on. It's not always easy to keep up with everyone and let them all know how you're getting on with your recovery. If you feel overwhelmed by how many people you need to keep informed, you could:

- ask them to make a group chat with each other to stay up to date with your recovery
- ask someone close to you to be the point of contact on your behalf.

“A lot of emotional storms were happening with me at the time. What does all of this mean to me? Am I going to survive? If I am, what does that look like in terms of how I'm going to be able to live my life moving forward? And what does that mean for my relationships with my wife or my kids or my family or friends?”

DARREN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

## Friends

Sometimes, it might feel hard to keep in contact with your friends. Remember, some friends will continue to support you and make you laugh, but others might find this more difficult.

There are lots of different reasons why relationships with friends could change or grow:

- In the early stages of recovery, you might **not be able to spend much time with friends face-to-face** due to concerns about getting an infection.

- Some friends might become a little awkward because they're **uncomfortable with the situation and worry about saying the wrong thing**. If you notice this and feel OK doing it, try to encourage your friends to be open and to ask questions about things they don't understand.
- It's likely you'll **make new friends on your transplant journey**. Friendships that grow out of shared experiences can offer support in ways that other friends and family might struggle with. For that reason, many people form deep, life-long friendships during their time in hospital and recovery.

“It was challenging being away from everybody and not being able to integrate back into normal routines [due to being immunocompromised post-transplant]. I did a semester online at uni, which was really hard for me, because all my friends moved into the house, and I felt very isolated.”

ERIN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

## Are you caring for a partner, relative or friend who had a transplant?

Helping someone through their transplant journey will probably become the most important thing in your life. And although you might be happy to do it, it can still feel difficult, demanding and have a negative effect on your mental health.

Just as people going through stem cell transplant need time to get used to less independence, you need to get used to your new role caring for someone. Lots of people find it hard to cope with this responsibility while also worrying about the health of the person they're caring for.

Try some of our advice and tips for self-care and supporting your wellbeing:

- **Tell them how you feel.** Many carers feel guilty about admitting to feeling stressed or overwhelmed, because they think they should be strong for their loved one. But it's OK to talk to them about feeling this way. Opening up about this will improve your mental wellbeing in the long term.
- **Find time and space to enjoy things on your own.** You could take up a hobby or activity, or phone a friend for a chat. It might help spending time with someone who doesn't know the person who had the stem cell transplant. Nobody will judge you for taking some time to do things you enjoy. Doing this can give you more energy to cope with the challenges ahead.
- **Get active and try to eat well.** Try to make sure you're physically looking after yourself as well as the person you're caring for. Try your best to maintain a healthy diet, good sleep and regular exercise – all of these factors can improve your mental health.

- **Seek support from other places.** If you need to talk to somebody else about how you're feeling, lots of options are available. The medical team can put you in touch with a therapist, or you can apply for our Telephone Emotional Support Service. Find out more at [anthonymolan.org/TESS](https://anthonymolan.org/TESS)
- **Share your story with other people.** It might help to share your story with people going through a similar experience, as well as get peer support. Hospitals and charities organise local support groups. You can also join the Anthony Nolan Patients and Families Forum at [anthonymolan.org/forum](https://anthonymolan.org/forum)

**“It's made us closer in many ways, which is positive. I'm a lot more protective over him though, which is probably annoying! I worry about him. Years on, I worry.”**

VICTORIA

WHOSE HUSBAND, ALEX, HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

For information and advice on support if you're caring for someone else, learn more on our website at [anthonymolan.org/parentsfamilyfriends](https://anthonymolan.org/parentsfamilyfriends)

# Body image and mental health

Whether you're preparing to start conditioning therapy or recovering from your transplant, changes in your body are an important part of your journey. But the way we see these changes can mean different things to different people. For a lot of us, body image can closely relate to our mental wellbeing.

## What is body image?

Our body image is:

- the way we think about and perceive our own physical appearance
- how we think we appear to other people looking at us.

When we're feeling low in confidence and self-esteem, it's easy to dwell on things we don't like about our bodies. By doing this, we forget the things we like about ourselves and find it hard to accept we look good.

## How does body image relate to stem cell transplant?

After overcoming such huge challenges with your health, you might now feel unhappy with parts of your physical appearance.

During your time in hospital and into your recovery, you might not have had much confidence in your health and body. You might have also found that any slight change, blemish or minor issue felt like a sign of something more serious. Over time, you might have become more in tune with your body and pay lots of attention to how it looks and feels.

As your recovery progresses, you'll hopefully feel less scared of something more serious developing.

**However, you might now have concerns about:**

- how your body looks to yourself and others
- how well your body responds to physical activity
- how people will react when they see you again for the first time.

## How could my body change?

You'll experience many changes to your body during conditioning therapy, treatment and recovery. You might have expected some of these changes, but others might come as a surprise and can feel more difficult to get used to.

Some changes to your body are temporary and you might begin to see improvements during recovery. For example, you might notice or already have experienced changes like:

- **Hair loss** – Most people who have chemotherapy lose their hair shortly after starting the treatment.
- **Weight loss** – For all sorts of reasons, from diet to nausea, avoiding weight loss can be difficult during the first few weeks of recovery.
- **Weight gain** – Long-term use of steroids can cause weight gain. You might take steroids to treat graft versus host disease (GvHD).
- **Skin changes** – Physical side effects like GvHD might cause your skin to become dry, blotchy or develop a rash. Some treatments can also cause scarring.

If you have any concerns about what's happening to your body, it's important to discuss them with your medical team. They can provide both practical and emotional support.

You can get more information on the physical effects of stem cell transplant at [anthonymolan.org/recovery](https://anthonymolan.org/recovery)

## How can I build body confidence?

When our confidence and self-esteem are low, we tend to only think about the things we feel are bad about the way we look. It might seem hard to believe, but you'll probably find people are less interested in your appearance than you might think – especially people you don't know.

Try preparing yourself for how people might talk to you. This will help you feel more confident and stay in control of the situation. You might find some of the following ideas useful:

- **Build up to seeing groups of people.** It will take time to feel like you're getting back to normal. It might seem daunting to imagine seeing people you know and watching them react to how you look. Start off by seeing a few close friends in a place you feel comfortable, then slowly build up to bigger social situations when you feel more confident.
- **Try to be assertive.** Take control of the situation and only talk about things on your terms. If someone asks you a question about your body or physical experience, be upfront and share as much or as little as you'd like. Try to say you aren't comfortable talking about certain things and change the subject to something else.
- **Use humour and jokes.** If you feel comfortable making a joke related to your situation, it can often help with awkwardness around certain topics.
- **Prepare for strange questions.** Some people, especially younger children, might ask an inappropriate question about your appearance at some point. Think about how you might want to respond to strange questions so you feel more in control when it happens.

If you experience stress and anxiety because of concerns about your body image, you might benefit from talking to a therapist or counsellor. For more information, see our talking therapies section on **page 50**.

## Where can I look for support for body image?

With time, a lot of people find they start to feel better about body image and worry less about it. But there are charities and organisations that can offer more support, if you need it:

- **Look Good Feel Better** – Offers services like online and in-person beauty tutorials, and makeover workshops for people living with the effects of cancer treatment. Visit their website at [lookgoodfeelbetter.co.uk](https://www.lookgoodfeelbetter.co.uk)
- **The Little Princess Trust** – This charity provides free wigs to children and young adults. Some hospitals also offer wigs free of charge. Visit their website at [littleprincesses.org.uk](https://www.littleprincesses.org.uk)
- **Big C** – Offers drop-in sessions to help you try out different types of headwear, including a support team who can help you with styling. Visit their website at [big-c.co.uk/help-with-headwear](https://www.big-c.co.uk/help-with-headwear)

## Taking control of your recovery and living well

Being away from the security of the hospital might bring up feelings of helplessness and anxiety. But if you're home, your recovery has begun and you're doing well. There are ways to manage your feelings, get in control of your recovery and maybe even try something new after a stem cell transplant.

Getting comfortable with your recovery is the first step in regaining some independence and finding a new sense of normality. This should help with both your physical and mental health as your recovery progresses.

Most people already have lots of things to think about when it comes to recovery, but organisation and control might not be one of them. By recording some information in a diary or a note on your phone, it will help you to:

- set recovery goals
- create reminders for yourself
- check your progress.

## Setting goals for recovery

Breaking down your big recovery targets into smaller, more manageable goals will help you to feel in control. When you can see improvement every day, it builds your confidence and self-esteem.

Feel free to set as many or few goals as you want. Make sure to choose goals you can see yourself feeling comfortable managing at any given moment.

### Your goal might be something like:

- making sure you take your medication for a week without forgetting
- going for slightly longer walks or increasing your step count each day
- having a shower and getting dressed.

**Remember to give yourself credit for the things you achieve.** It's easy to keep looking ahead to the next step, the next goal. But this might leave you feeling like you're always striving for something. Take time to notice and appreciate what you have done, and the progress you have made.

## My big recovery goals


## How can I split these up into small, manageable goals?


## Exercise goals

Being active reduces fatigue and improves your physical strength. Exercise and fresh air can also help boost your mental wellbeing. Research shows regular exercise can **reduce stress, relieve anxiety** and **improve self-esteem**.

It's important to not overdo it, as your fitness levels will have reduced during your treatment. Set yourself small goals and build on them gradually over time.

For more information, see our webpage on exercise after a stem cell transplant at [anthodynolan.org/exercise](https://anthodynolan.org/exercise)



What are my exercise goals?

## Sleep goals

Many of us know things like stress and anxiety can make sleep more difficult. However, poor sleep can also contribute to a mental health problem developing, or make an existing one worse.

Not only do we feel better after a good night's sleep, but sleeping also helps with recovery. If you track and record your sleep, you can look back at times when problems occurred. This will help your medical team spot patterns and find ways to help.

For more information on sleep hygiene, see our webpage on fatigue at [anthodynolan.org/fatigue](https://anthodynolan.org/fatigue)



What are my sleep goals?

## Eating and drinking goals

People lose weight after transplant for many different reasons. During recovery in particular, your body needs more nutrients than usual to help grow and repair your cells.

To help with weight loss and recovery, you might set a goal to eat a certain number of calories per day, or aim to eat **five portions of fruit and vegetables daily**. Eating healthily should help you feel both physically and mentally stronger.

Your body's cells need water to work, including your brain cells and your new stem cells. It's important to keep yourself hydrated during recovery.

Try to always have a water bottle with you, so you can drink the recommended amount. Doctors give different recommendations to different people, but generally we should drink **1.5 to 2 litres of fluids daily**.

It might be easier to drink smaller amounts more often, but you can track your overall fluid intake by noting every time you finish a glass or bottle.

For more information, see our webpage on diet after a stem cell transplant at [anthonymolan.org/diet](https://anthonymolan.org/diet)



What are my eating and drinking goals?

## Setting reminders and taking notes

There could be times when you find certain mental tasks more difficult than you once did, like:

- remembering appointments
- recalling the names of people
- concentrating on things in general.

These problems are known as **cancer-related cognitive changes** (CRCCs) because they affect the way we recall and process information. You usually experience these alongside feeling fatigued. Even without CRCCs, it can feel like you have so much to remember during your time in hospital and during recovery.

You might want to set goals around creating a strategy to help you keep on top of things, including:

- **Appointments** – after your transplant, you’ll regularly visit outpatients. Doctors will check everything is going well and possibly adjust your medication. You’ll also have regular tests to measure your blood count, liver and kidney function, and check for viruses.
- **Medication** – it can feel hard to remember which medication to take and when. You will also go through changes to your medication which might mean adjusting to a new schedule. Putting reminders in your phone, calendar or diary will help make sure you don’t miss anything.
- **Medical team** – during your transplant journey, your medical team is responsible for giving you the best possible care. However, it can sometimes be difficult to keep track of everybody’s name and what they do. You might find it helpful to write down the name and contact details of everyone in your team.

For more information on how your stem cell transplant could affect your memory, visit [anthonymolan.org/cognition](http://anthonymolan.org/cognition)

Day of week	Medication I need to take
Monday	
Tuesday	
Wednesday	
Thursday	
Friday	
Saturday	
Sunday	

Date	Appointment (name, time, location)

Name of people in my medical team	Jobs and responsibilities of people in my medical team



**“I feel like I have to be my own stock taker at home. This is how many drugs I have got and this how long it’s going to last me.”**

**GEORGI WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT**

### Recording your progress

There will be days when you feel physically and mentally drained, but you’ll also have amazing days when you feel like things are going perfectly. It can really help to record your emotional wellbeing in a diary. Try using the examples in this section to see if you find them helpful.

You gain a sense of progress, but it also highlights when you need extra support from friends, family or a professional. You could also record how you feel physically to get a better idea of how your recovery is going.

### My mental wellbeing diary

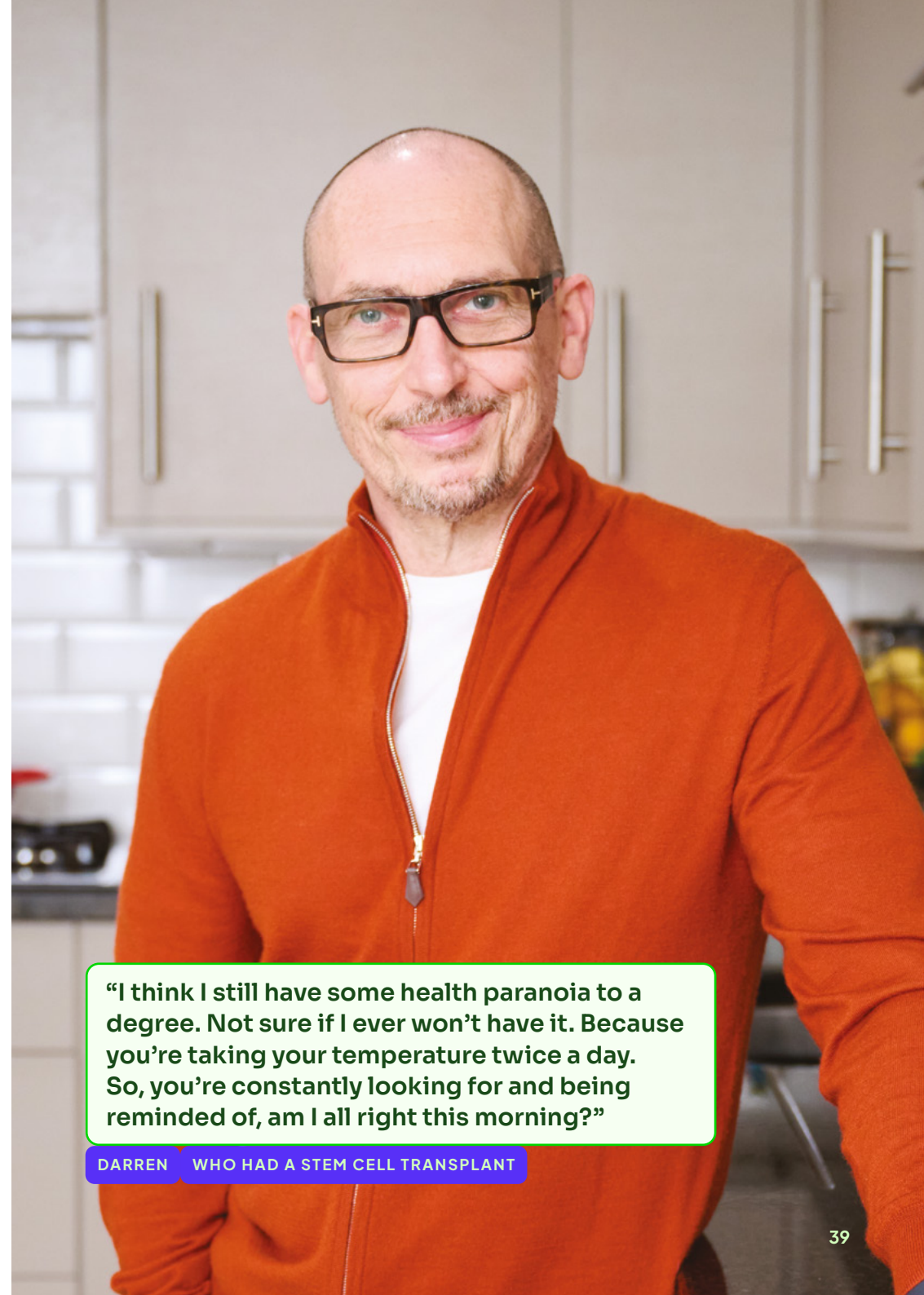
You might find great benefits to recording how your feelings are changing.

Day of week	How did I feel today on a scale of 1 to 10?	Did anything happen that affected my mental wellbeing?
Monday	/10	
Tuesday	/10	
Wednesday	/10	
Thursday	/10	
Friday	/10	
Saturday	/10	
Sunday	/10	

## My physical wellbeing diary

It's helpful for your medical team if you can accurately recall when you had certain side effects and how strong they were. With this information, they can adjust your medication accordingly. Try to get into the habit of recording any changes you experience.

Day of week	How did I feel today on a scale of 1 to 10?	Did anything happen that affected my physical wellbeing?
Monday	/10	
Tuesday	/10	
Wednesday	/10	
Thursday	/10	
Friday	/10	
Saturday	/10	
Sunday	/10	



**“I think I still have some health paranoia to a degree. Not sure if I ever won't have it. Because you're taking your temperature twice a day. So, you're constantly looking for and being reminded of, am I all right this morning?”**

**DARREN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT**

## Tips to improve your mental health and wellbeing

There might be times when you feel down or find it hard to cope with the effects of your transplant.

This is perfectly normal. It's something many people go through. Finding ways to manage difficult feelings will make things easier and help you be more resilient in the future.

We are all different, so it's impossible to say what will work best for you. Some of these ideas might work better at different times. Try to think about other tough points in your life, and what you did to help you get through. You might find these methods come in useful again.

### Spending time with others

You can improve your mental health and wellbeing by trying some tips based on socialising and spending time with other people:

- **Talk to someone** – sometimes just talking to someone close to you can make a huge difference. If you want to speak to people who understand your experience, you can talk to your medical team or someone in Anthony Nolan Patient Services by going to [anthonymolan.com/support](https://anthonymolan.com/support)
- **Meet up with a friend** – try to spend time connecting with friends, even if it's just by text or phone call. Spending time with people who make you feel comfortable can take your mind off difficult thoughts and feelings. A lot of us find it easier to be around people outside our immediate family, because they aren't quite as involved in our transplant journey.

- **Join a group** – if you have a particular interest, look for a local group where you can meet other people who share your hobby. You can usually check social media to find out what's available in your area.
- **Have a laugh** – we might know someone who can always make us laugh. Or even if you're not ready to meet up with people yet, you can still have a laugh at home by watching your favourite comedies, finding new ones on streaming services or listening to funny podcasts. Ask your friends for their comedy recommendations too.

### Relaxation techniques

You can improve your mental health and wellbeing by trying some relaxation techniques:

- **Deep breathing** – it might sound simple, but taking a deep breath can really help calm your nerves. Practising controlled breathing will also help you to relax.
- **Health-promoting exercises** – exercise techniques like tai chi and yoga combine gentle movements, stretching and breathing exercises with elements of meditation. This helps you to focus your thoughts on the present and relax your mind.
- **Meditation** – you might have already tried mindfulness or other types of meditation. The aim is to help you become more aware of your feelings and accept them for what they are. Overall, this should help you to think more clearly and react calmly in difficult situations.

## Activities and interests

You can improve your mental health and wellbeing by trying some ideas related to different activities and interests:

- **Learn a new skill** – you can study a wide range of courses through night schools or online, including cookery, art and languages. You could also do a distance learning course without the need to move or commute. You might even decide to re-train for a new career.
- **Writing or journalling** – some people find it helps to write about their experiences of stem cell transplant, both good and bad. Even if you don't want to share your thoughts, writing them down can still help you to process them. We've included some blank pages for journalling from **page 65**. You might find comfort in reading stories from people going through a similar experience, which you can find at [anthohnolan.org/stories](https://anthohnolan.org/stories)
- **Art and hobbies** – if you find it hard to express your thoughts and feelings with words, you can try other creative outlets instead. Drawing, painting, sculpting, collage and music can all help with processing difficult feelings.
- **Music** – make a playlist of your favourite songs that always lift your mood. If you play an instrument, you might want to write a song or take some time to improve your skills and boost your confidence. Joining local choirs and other musical groups is a great way of doing something you enjoy while meeting new people.
- **Travel** – if there's somewhere in the world you've always wanted to visit, now might be the perfect time to go on that trip. Check with your medical team about whether it's safe for you to travel. For more information, visit [anthohnolan.org/travelabroad](https://anthohnolan.org/travelabroad)



"I think it's really important to constantly have some kind of goal, even if it's just to get out of bed that day."

GEORGI WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT,  
AT THE BRITISH TRANSPLANT GAMES

# Talking about your mental health

Letting someone else know how you're feeling is often the best way to start getting help. Most of us feel a sense of relief after having opened up to someone.

Before you start, remember many people go through things that can affect their mental health. Even if they haven't had a stem cell transplant, they could have experienced similar feelings for different reasons.

When it comes to talking about something that could feel upsetting, have a think about who you're most comfortable talking to:

- **Someone close to you** – for some people a family member or friend is the best person to open up to. Or you might have found your relationship with them is slightly different after your transplant.
- **Someone who doesn't know you** – many people prefer to talk with someone they don't know as well. This could be a member of your community, like a religious figure, or a mental health professional. You can also look into talking therapies, which we have more information about on [page 50](#).

**“The sessions that I had with [my Anthony Nolan clinical psychologist], were very helpful. Working with him helped me work through a lot of fog and a lot of confusion. A lot of emotional storms were happening with me at the time.”**

**DARREN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT**

## Tips for talking about your mental health

Before you talk to someone about how you feel:

- Try to **gather your thoughts beforehand** so you know what you want to say. Writing some notes in advance might help, especially if speaking to a mental health professional.
- Find a **relaxing and quiet place to talk**. Ideally this should be somewhere comfortable and without distractions.
- Expect quite a few questions. You **don't have to answer everything they ask**, but it will help the other person understand what you're going through.

Different people get different benefits from talking about their wellbeing with other people, for example:

- Sharing your concerns might help you feel supported. Someone **might be able to give you practical advice** you hadn't thought of before.
- Getting the opinions of other people can **help you make decisions**. For example, making decisions about which type of treatment to have or other important life choices.

Some people worry about letting their family and friends know about what they're going through. Even if you feel like you should be protecting them, you need to let them know how they can help. **Don't worry about feeling like you're too demanding**. They'll want to do what they can, or help you find another solution.

Remember your difficult thoughts and feelings might come back, even after opening up to someone. It will probably take some time before you feel like you can cope with things alone.

**“There’s probably stuff that even if you’re not admitting it to yourself, it’s probably in the back of your mind, and I think it’s better to bring it forward and have a healthy conversation rather than let it fester.”**

**DARREN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT**

### What if I don’t want to talk?

It might start to feel emotionally draining for people close to you to keep asking, ‘How are you feeling?’ While they’re trying to show they care, the thought of saying the same thing over and over can feel stressful. It might help if you try to:

- have the confidence to say you’d rather not talk about certain topics
- direct the conversation to something you’re more comfortable with.

Some people only share their progress with one or two close relatives or friends, then ask them to pass messages on to their wider circle of friends and family. In the same way, some people prefer to use social media as a way of keeping people up to date.

There could be times when you’d rather be alone with your own feelings and don’t want to talk to anybody. While this can be a good way of processing your thoughts, you need to make sure you aren’t bottling things up inside either.

**It’s important to not completely shut yourself off from others. You should seek their help when you need it.**

### Deciding on a type of mental health support

When you’re deciding what type of mental health support you might want to try, you’ll come across lots of options. Some of the most common types of support include:

- **Medication** – doctors can prescribe medication to help manage the symptoms of mental health problems like depression and anxiety. Some will have side effects, so make sure you talk through your options with your medical team before you try. Medication often works well in combination with a type of talking therapy.
- **Talking therapies** – this means talking to a trained professional about your feelings and the ways you react to them. Some examples of talking therapies include counselling and psychotherapy. You’ll have a one-to-one conversation with a therapist, either in-person or online. For more information, go to our section on talking therapies on **page 50**.
- **Self-help** – if you would prefer not to talk to a therapist for any reason, it’s possible to try some things on your own. A variety of self-help books and online information will guide you through the process at a pace you feel comfortable with.
- **Support groups** – you can join specific support groups related to mental health after stem cell transplant. Understanding and sharing this experience with other people can really help.
- **Cancer centres** – certain charities, hospitals or other organisations run cancer centres. Here, you can talk to experts and medical professionals, as well as people who have had cancer.
- **Useful organisations** – across the UK, there are hundreds of useful organisations offering mental wellbeing advice and support to anyone who needs it. You can find them in person, online or call them for a chat.

For more information and to find out more about all the support on offer, go to **pages 60–64**.

## When should I look for extra support?

Some of us need extra support to help us cope with our mental health. But it's not always easy to recognise this, especially if you're feeling anxious or low.

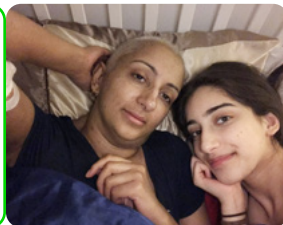
You might need to get support from your GP or medical team if you:

- have been **feeling very low** and not like your usual self
- **cannot find the motivation** to do anything, even important tasks
- regularly have **trouble sleeping**
- experience **lots of negative thoughts** about yourself, the world and the future
- feel like you **cannot control your thoughts**
- feel **much more anxious** than you ever have before.

If you start to experience any of these thoughts or behaviours, your GP or medical team can explain your options if they think you need extra support. This might include medication and talking therapies.

If you need to speak to someone right now, you can call Samaritans for free on **116 123**. For information about mental health problems, visit the Mind website at [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

**“I tried to go back to some of the activities I did before my transplant [to support my mental health] but they did not work. So, I went private and I am now speaking to a psychologist.”**



KAL WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT



## What is talking therapy?

During difficult times in our lives, it can be easier to talk to someone we don't know. When we talk to a trained professional about our feelings and how we react to them, it's called talking therapy.

In talking therapy, you'll have the time and space to be heard and help you think about your situation differently. It might not make your problems go away, but it should give you the tools to make them easier to deal with.

You might hear these professionals called therapists, counsellors or psychotherapists. Terms like these can also be used to describe certain types of talking therapies. Talking to a therapist can form part of your bigger strategy for looking after your mental health and living a healthy lifestyle.

**You don't have to wait until you feel overwhelmed before seeking help.** Talking therapies can help anybody at any time. Being able to recognise your feelings and process them in a controlled way might even help you avert a crisis before it begins.

**“My psychologist helped me with so many things – small things and big things – and she's had a lasting impact on my physical health, as well as my psychological health.”**



DAN

WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

## What happens in talking therapy?

In talking therapy, your therapist will usually start by asking how you're feeling and what's making you feel that way. Together you'll discuss your reaction to these feelings and find ways to try changing your thoughts so you feel more in control.

A session with your therapist is usually a one-to-one conversation lasting about an hour. In each session, they should:

- ask you how you're feeling and what makes you feel that way
- discuss how you react to these feelings
- work with you to help you change your behaviour in the way that you want.

Although talking therapies help a lot of people, they aren't for everyone. Some people try them and find no real benefit. There's nothing wrong with this and it certainly isn't your fault – maybe the timing wasn't right, or another approach would suit you better.

## What types of talking therapies are there?

Different talking therapies help people in different situations. Most of the time, it's to help people through situations that could be either stressful or upsetting.

There's no right or wrong answer for which type will be best for you. Everybody's situation is unique. Many therapists are trained in several different types. They can tailor their approach to best suit your needs.

### Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

On the simplest level, CBT has two main focuses:

- what we think about (cognitive)
- how we react or things we do (behaviour).

We tend to react in a certain way towards negative thoughts, which can in turn make us feel worse. CBT is about learning to **identify and challenge unhelpful or inaccurate thoughts and beliefs**. This can be very helpful for many people going through stem cell transplant treatment and recovery.

CBT helps you recognise when you're having negative thoughts and develop coping strategies to react in a more balanced way. Your therapist will work with you on this and set you goals to work on between sessions.

For more information, you can visit the Mind website at [mind.org.uk/CBT](https://www.mind.org.uk/CBT)

### Counselling

In a counselling session, your therapist will listen to your concerns and how you're feeling, without judgement. **They won't tell you what you should do to make things better**, but will work with you to find your own solutions to your problems.

Counselling can help you cope with all sorts of mental health or wellbeing issues, including:

- depression
- anxiety
- difficulties related to medical complications after transplant, like fertility or body image.

You don't have to do counselling face-to-face. You can do it over the phone, by video call, or even by typing to each other online if you prefer.



**“I was lucky enough to get sessions with a counsellor, as I needed to talk to someone outside of what was happening to us. The sessions really helped me to cope with uncertainty. All the unknowns were such a struggle for me.”**

**MARIACRISTINA** WHOSE HUSBAND, GEORGE, HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

## Private therapy

There could be a long waiting list for NHS services, or you might decide you want to see someone for longer. If this happens, and you're able to afford it, you could consider paying for private therapy. You can find a registered therapist through the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

If you'd like to see a private therapist but you're worried about costs, some therapists and organisations might offer:

- a free taster session so you can be more confident it's the right option for you
- reduced rates for people on low incomes
- reduced rates for people in full-time education.

You could also apply to charities and other organisations for funding, including our Anthony Nolan grants.

For more details, see our page on financial support at [anthohnolan.org/financial-support](https://anthohnolan.org/financial-support)

**“I have gone private as I was not offered any support through any other means. I'm still working on my mental health.”**

KAL WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

## Finding the right person to talk to

Just as your situation is unique, so is the relationship with your therapist. You will find you get on better with some therapists than with others. You might find talking therapy is more effective when you feel comfortable enough to trust and talk openly with your therapist.

Research has shown people benefit most when their relationship with their therapist is stronger. This means it's important you have the confidence to speak out when you think it isn't working. There's nothing wrong with asking to see someone else if it helps you more.

### How to access talking therapies

If you'd like to try a talking therapy, your medical team or GP can refer you. If you're experiencing problems with depression or anxiety, you can access free treatment in England through the NHS Talking Therapies Programme at [nhs.uk/talkingtherapies](https://nhs.uk/talkingtherapies)

Anthony Nolan also offers a free Telephone Emotional Support service specifically for people who have had a stem cell transplant, as well as their families. If you think this might be helpful to you, email our team to arrange an appointment on [patientinfo@anthohnolan.org](mailto:patientinfo@anthohnolan.org) or visit [anthohnolan.org/TESS](https://anthohnolan.org/TESS)

## What if talking therapy isn't for me?

Although talking therapies have helped many people through and after their stem cell transplant, they aren't for everyone. Some people try them and find no real benefit.

**There's nothing wrong with this, and it certainly isn't your fault.** There are many alternatives to talking therapies to consider, including lots of different types of support groups, online and in-person.

You can also get medication, but remember some of them can have side effects – make sure you get all the information you need first. Talk through your options with your medical team and people close to you before deciding to start taking medication for a mental health problem.

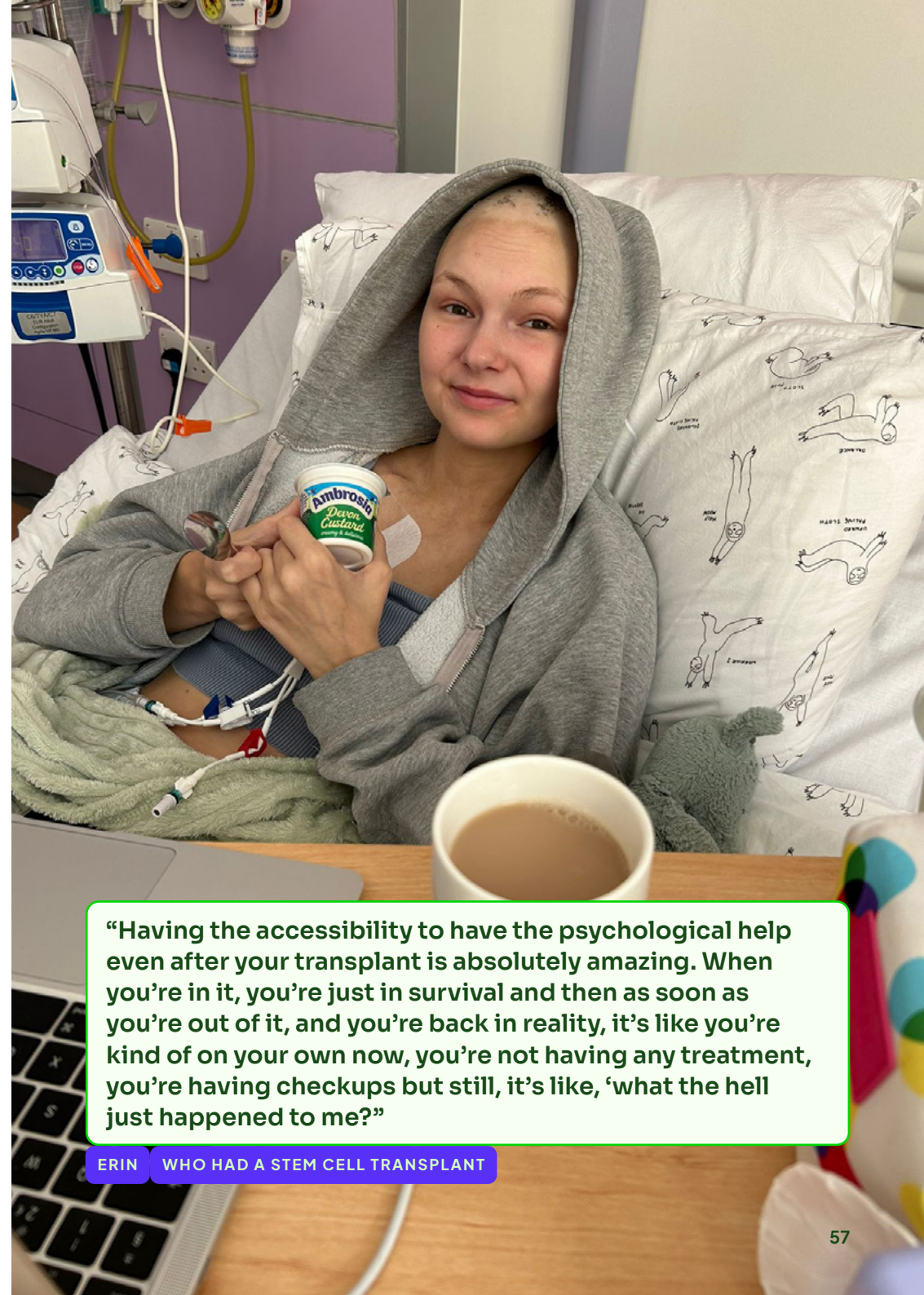
### Support groups

Nobody expects you to deal with everything on your own. In a support group, you can **talk to other people who have experienced everything related to stem cell transplants.**

With them, you can:

- share your concerns about your thoughts and feelings
- hear about how they deal with or have dealt with problems
- help yourself to put your own situation in context
- give each other support and encouragement.

Your medical team can give you information on the services in your area, or you can try searching online.



**“Having the accessibility to have the psychological help even after your transplant is absolutely amazing. When you're in it, you're just in survival and then as soon as you're out of it, and you're back in reality, it's like you're kind of on your own now, you're not having any treatment, you're having checkups but still, it's like, 'what the hell just happened to me?'”**

ERIN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

## Peer support

Talking to other people who understand your concerns, and hearing how they deal with theirs, will help you put your situation in context. You can give each other support and encouragement, known as peer support.

People who have stem cell transplants can often feel isolated because their immediate family and friends aren't going through the same experience. Although they're trying to be as supportive as they can, it's not the same as talking to someone who understands the experience.

Macmillan signposts to peer support services for people with any type of cancer, including blood cancers – visit their website at [macmillan.org.uk/in-your-area](https://www.macmillan.org.uk/in-your-area)

## Online support

Online support like chatrooms and forums could suit you if you don't like the idea of sharing your feelings in a face-to-face group. You can take your time and be as involved in the discussion as you like.

You might also find comfort in reading about the experiences of other people, without feeling like you have to contribute or share your story in response.

Some useful online support groups include:

- **The Anthony Nolan Patients and Families Forum**, where you can read and talk about a wide range of topics related to stem cell transplants at [anthonynolan.org/forum](https://www.anthonynolan.org/forum)
- **The Macmillan online forum**, where you'll find discussions about living with cancer and cancer treatments at [community.macmillan.org.uk](https://community.macmillan.org.uk)

## Cancer centres

Some charities fund purpose-built cancer centres which you'll often find onsite in hospitals. These centres provide a calm and tranquil place for people to focus on their recovery and mental wellbeing.

Specially trained health professionals run these centres. They provide information and activities related to cancer and recovery, including:

- nutrition and health advice
- financial advice
- emotional support
- recreational classes
- professional talks
- support groups.

In some cases, you don't need to live nearby to get support. They might be able to offer help on the phone or online. You can visit these charities' websites to find out more:

- Macmillan Cancer Centres at [macmillan.org.uk](https://www.macmillan.org.uk)
- Maggie's Cancer Centres at [maggies.org/our-centres](https://www.maggies.org/our-centres)

Please note most cancer centres are only able to **support people who have had a stem cell transplant to treat a blood cancer**. If you had a transplant to treat a **blood disorder**, you can't usually access these services.

## Support from Anthony Nolan

If you or a loved one is affected by stem cell transplant, there are many ways the Anthony Nolan Patient Services Team can support you. Call us on **0303 303 0303** or **email [patientinfo@anthonymolan.org](mailto:patientinfo@anthonymolan.org)**

### You can also support your mental health by:

- **Using the Telephone Emotional Support Service** – this service is available for free for stem cell transplant recipients and family members. You can talk about whatever's on your mind. Find out more at **[anthonymolan.org/TESS](https://anthonymolan.org/TESS)**
- **Getting connected** – find support from other people who understand by joining our Patients and Families Forum at **[anthonymolan.org/forum](https://anthonymolan.org/forum)**
- **Finding information** – our website has lots of helpful information about what it's like to go through a transplant. Download or order our booklets for free, and find links to other places where you can get support at **[anthonymolan.org/patients](https://anthonymolan.org/patients)**

### Our clinical nurse specialists

Anthony Nolan funds, recruits and supports specialist nurses based in UK transplant centres. By doing this, we aim to raise the standard of post-transplant care around the country. We want people who have a stem cell transplant, and their families, to have equal access to support at all stages of recovery, for as long as it's needed.

### Our clinical psychologists

Anthony Nolan also funds several clinical psychology posts based in UK transplant centres. These psychologists help people come to terms with the emotional and mental effects of their stem cell transplant.

**“It had become clear to me that recovery hadn't gone as well as it could have, and I wasn't getting any better, but there was nothing that I could do about it. That for me was the hardest thing. Now I have problems that I know can't be fixed. This is who I am now. That, for me, was the most difficult thing. So, I spoke to my CNS and asked to be referred to the clinical psychologist.”**

**DAN WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT**

## Other useful contacts

Across the UK, there are hundreds of useful organisations offering mental wellbeing advice and support to anyone who needs it. You can find them in person, online or even call them for a chat.

### British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

[bacp.co.uk](http://bacp.co.uk)

01455 88 33 00

Information about counselling and therapists in the UK.

### Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)

[thecalmzone.net](http://thecalmzone.net)

0800 58 58 58

A suicide prevention charity offering online information and support, as well as a helpline for people who are struggling, or if you're worried about someone.

### Macmillan Cancer Support

[macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)

0808 808 0000

Practical, financial and emotional support for people with cancer and their family and friends.

### Maggie's

[maggies.org](http://maggies.org)

0300 123 1801

Offers help to anyone affected by cancer. Talk to and get support from professionals on any topic related to your treatment or recovery.

### Mind

[mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

Infoline: 0300 123 3393

Support line: 0300 102 1234

Provides information and helplines for people who need support for their mental health or wellbeing.

### Mind Over Cancer

[mindovercancer.org.uk](http://mindovercancer.org.uk)

A charity offering mental health support to young people up to 29 years old who have had a cancer diagnosis, as well as their families. Also offers a free counselling service at [mindovercancer.org.uk/get-help-counselling](http://mindovercancer.org.uk/get-help-counselling)

### NHS Talking Therapies Programme

[nhs.uk/talkingtherapies](http://nhs.uk/talkingtherapies)

Allows people to self-refer to NHS-funded counselling and therapy services available in their local area.

### On My Mind

[annafreud.org/on-my-mind](https://annafreud.org/on-my-mind)

Offers support and resources for young people who need help with their mental health and wellbeing.

### Relate

[relate.org.uk](https://relate.org.uk)

Offers information and advice on relationships, as well as counselling and sex therapy. You can book a call with them or visit a centre in the UK by going to [relate.org.uk/find-your-online-centre](https://relate.org.uk/find-your-online-centre)

### Samaritans

[samaritans.org](https://samaritans.org)

116 123

Offers a free, confidential helpline where you can talk about anything at all, 24 hours a day.

### Shout

Text **SHOUT** to **85258**

Offers a free, confidential and 24/7 text messaging service for anyone in the UK who needs support for mental health and wellbeing.



### Your journal

Lots of people find writing or journalling helps during the stem cell transplant journey. Writing down your thoughts and experiences can improve your mental wellbeing and help you to manage difficult feelings. It might even feel helpful to share what you've written with someone else, like family, friends, a support group or a therapist.

To give you some ideas of what you might write about, you can find examples from other people at [anthohnolan.org/stories](https://anthohnolan.org/stories)



“I feel lucky because I know that access to psychological support is not always the greatest. I definitely found it one of the most important things for me. I think a lot of the time, you don’t quite process what’s happening to you until afterwards.”

ERIN

WHO HAD A STEM CELL TRANSPLANT

This material was co-funded through a grant from Johnson & Johnson, who have had no control or influence over the content, information or design.



For further patient information:

[anthonymolan.org/patients](https://anthonymolan.org/patients)  
[facebook.com/anthonymolanpatients](https://facebook.com/anthonymolanpatients)  
[patientinfo@anthonymolan.org](mailto:patientinfo@anthonymolan.org)  
0303 303 0303



[anthonymolan.org](https://anthonymolan.org)

