

# TE HONO Ā-WHĀNAU Ā-HOA

## CONNECTING WITH FRIENDS AND WHĀNAU AFTER CANCER



# Whakahoahoa - friendships

Spending time on whakawhanaunga (relationships) can help you feel less isolated and contribute to your identity and sense of belonging. While you might have formed new connections through cancer, keeping positive relationships with your whānau (family), mates and community is super important.

*I lost some friends because I spent less time with them and missed out on a lot when I was sick. People didn't know how to talk about stuff, and some people avoided the topic and avoided me. I also felt uncomfortable when people kept saying things like "I told you everything will be alright" or "but that's a while ago; you're fine now."*

Young person

**I was pretty upset and angry when I had cancer. How do I let my friends know this wasn't about them?**

It's normal to go through some tough emotions when you're diagnosed with cancer. If you felt angry or questioned why you had cancer, and not someone else, you're not alone. If you couldn't share how you were feeling with your mates at the time, it doesn't mean you can't share it now. They might be more understanding than you think.

**My friendships have changed. Is this normal?**

Perhaps you have discovered new interests, found a new purpose, or developed different beliefs since you have had cancer. Consequently, your friendships may have changed too. You may have become closer to some mates, drifted apart from others or formed new friendships. If you have discovered you don't have as much in common with some of the people you were close to before, that's okay.



Remember to focus on the friendships that matter and don't sweat the ones that don't.

**I get more nervous in social situations than before. Why is this?**

If you have been isolated for a while, it's normal to feel a little out of practice socialising or to feel nervous about seeing people. However, spending time with your mates has HUGE benefits. It can improve your mood, provide you with something to look forward to, and give you a chance to receive some comfort and support from others. Try a gradual approach to socialising to help you get started.



If the social plans your mates invite you to feel overwhelming, suggest alternatives: for example; if you're not up to going out, ask your mates to come to your place, or if you're struggling with fatigue, suggest alternatives like watching a movie. Plan activities at the times you have the most energy so you are up for it.

**I've lost connection with some of my mates. What can I do?**

*'Reply when they message you, even if it's just to say "Hey I'm not up to it right now. I'll message you later."*

Young person

If your mates are not in touch as much as you would like, it may be because they think you're still sick, or maybe they've been reaching out and not getting a reply. Remember, good communication is two sided so reply to messages and say yes to invites to hang out when you can.



If you get tired easily, tell people, and ease back into things at a pace that works for you. Be open to making new friends as your social confidence increases.

## How do I talk about cancer with my friends?

*'I think you just need to tell your friends how you feel as they are not going to know unless you tell them. If you're feeling down and are over life at the moment, they can help you. They're there because they want to be.'*

### Young person

Many young people find talking about cancer challenging. Setting boundaries for how much information you share, and with who, can help. For example, you might tell your best friends every detail, but just tell casual friends that you had cancer and are better now. People's responses may also bring up strong feelings for you. For example, you might get annoyed when people say things like *"at least you got through it"* or *"you're lucky you didn't lose your hair,"* or you may get frustrated if someone starts to give you advice or compare you to other people they know who have had cancer.

## Questions you might get asked:

What was it like having cancer?

Are you cured now?

Will the cancer come back?

Will your hair grow back?

Can you have children?

What was it like?

Were you scared of dying?



Preparing some responses ahead of time to questions that people might ask, may help you feel more in control.

## TOP TIPS FOR CANCER KŌRERO/TALK

**It's not just about cancer.** Remind friends and whānau that there may be times when you want to talk about what you have been through and times when you don't.

**Find some key phrases.** If you don't feel like talking about your experience - Try phrases like: *"Thanks but I'd rather not talk about it"* or *"Actually, I'm sick of talking about cancer. Can we talk about something else?"* You are not being rude; you are just setting a boundary.

**The elephant in the room.** Friends may be avoiding bringing things up because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Tell your mates **how you feel** and if you are up for it, answer their questions and let them know where you are at.

**Pick a good time.** When you are ready to kōrero, choose a time when you are free from distractions. It is not a good time to pour your heart out just before you enter a party or before you rush off somewhere.

**Have a laugh.** Don't be afraid to laugh and joke. Humour is a great way to start a conversation about a difficult topic.

**Share what you're comfortable with.** Jot down notes on topics you are happy to chat about or send an email, letter or message if talking kanohi ke te kanohi - face to face feels too much. Maybe the person just needs to know what your cancer was and where you are with things now.

**Share your feelings.** Be honest. Anger, frustration, fear and resentment are normal reactions to cancer. Hiding these feelings will only make them grow and make you feel isolated. If people care, you do not have to be upbeat for them if you're not feeling it.

**Share info.** There are some good resources on The AYA Cancer Network Aotearoa website under the **Young People and Whānau** section that your friends can read. Canteen Australia have also produced the resource **'Supporting Your Friend When They Have Cancer'** which you can find on their website.

## When your mates have cancer too

Mates with cancer are more likely to understand what you are going through and this can provide a lot of comfort. Unfortunately, some of the friends you have built strong connections with may not survive cancer, and this can be tough. Losing a mate is not something many people your age experience, and it can be upsetting and hard to cope with.

*‘When my friend died I didn’t know who to turn to, I felt so lost. I also couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that it could have been me.’*

### Young person

As grief affects everyone differently, you might feel a range of emotions like sadness, anger or loneliness. Some people also experience ‘Survivor’s Guilt’, which is when you feel guilty that you are here when your mate is not, and it is quite common. While it might be hard to talk about your friend after they have died, keeping their memory alive is important and acknowledges what they mean to you. Don’t be afraid to share stories or talk about your time together. Remember you do not have to carry the loss on your own; there are people who can support you.



Talk with someone close to you, your healthcare team, counsellor, support worker, or psychologist. Check out the helpful grief resources produced by Aotearoa youth charity Kenzie’s Gift [www.kenziesgift.com](http://www.kenziesgift.com)



## The healthcare team became part of my whānau and I was sad to say goodbye. Is this normal?

If you developed close bonds with members of your healthcare team, saying goodbye can be hard. Remember that transitioning from the team that cared for you is a good thing, as it means you are getting better.



Celebrate moving on creatively, for example make a scrapbook of your time in hospital and include photos of the staff, or invite them to include a message. Alternatively, you could bring in morning tea when returning for follow-up appointments or arrange to pop in and say hi.

### NOTE:

*It can be tempting to try to reach out to your healthcare team through social media, or by inviting some of your favourite health professionals for a catch up. Unfortunately, as part of their Professional Code of Conduct, they will not, be allowed to engage with you outside the healthcare environment.*

# Whānau

*‘My parents and I have become much closer since my diagnosis as they’ve been supporting me with every step. They’ve become more understanding of me.’*

Young person

## Cancer affects whānau too

Having a family member with cancer brings up emotions for whānau too. Fear, worry, concern or grief are just a few. You have had a life-threatening illness and that can be scary for the people who feel aroha (love) for you.

Many young people, say they do not know how they would have got through treatment without their whānau, and in many cases, that cancer has brought them closer together. But, that doesn’t mean it hasn’t been hard for whānau too.

## Things at home have been hard since I had cancer. Is it my fault?

When a household is under stress, people can argue or disagree with each other more than normal. If this has been happening in your household, remember that some of the stress might have already been there before you had cancer. Every whānau manages stress in different ways. It’s important to not blame yourself for any disagreements that go on in your household.

Tip

Remember you can’t always control the behaviour of the people around you, but blaming yourself won’t make things any better.

## Family roles shift when treatment ends

Before cancer, you may have been attending school, living away from home, studying or working, then **WHAM** cancer hit and everything changed. During this time, you may have become dependent on your whānau or partner for practical, emotional or financial support. Perhaps they took time off work to care for you, stayed with you in hospital overnight or attended appointments with you.

Now that you have finished treatment, you and your whānau might go through a period of transition before establishing a new normal. During this period, some young people find being “fussed over” frustrating and want more independence, while others report feeling abandoned and find it hard to take on household roles or manage their healthcare when they don’t feel ready.

Tip

Gaining **some** independence is great for learning to manage things on your own, but take it at a pace that works for you. If your whānau have been caring for you, mahi tahi - work together to manage the transition and keep communication open and honest.

## Partners

Many partners become the primary caregiver during cancer treatment and it’s common to take on a different role in the relationship, household or family unit. Now treatment is finished, it might be a good time to re-establish your roles in your relationship.

Tip

Cancer treatment is tough for partners too. Your partner may like to access support through organisations like The Cancer Society.

# Tuakana Teina - Brothers and Sisters

During treatment, the roles in your whānau may have changed. Perhaps your siblings were cared for by other members of your whānau, or missed activities they enjoyed.

Younger siblings may have been scared or worried about you and this may have come out in other ways like attention seeking behaviour (behaving badly or being argumentative), jealousy of a special opportunity that you've had, or being upset about the attention you've been receiving.

Older siblings may have become protective or over-involved in your life, bossed you round more, or been controlling around your mates. Remember this is only because they care about you, and they may not know how to show you in other ways.



**Tip** Encourage your sibs to access support too. They may like to chat to a counsellor at school or access sibling activities or counselling through CanTeen or the Child Cancer Foundation.

*'It put a lot of stress on my family and looking back, I should have recommended my mum went to support meetings to help her deal with it all emotionally.'*

*Young person*

Your caregivers, siblings, cousins, partner or koro may be holding things together not wanting to show you how upset or worried they have been. Let them know where they can go for help.



## If you are a parent yourself

When you had cancer, your tamariki may have been scared something bad had happened to you, or worried about whether they would see you again. If they visited you in hospital, they may have noticed changes to your appearance, or been worried about medical equipment and what it was for.

Try to make space for your tamariki to share their feelings or find some helpful resources to help them talk things through. Kenzie's Gift are a charity that support children and young people with a parent with a life threatening illness. They have a range of recommended resources online, as well as free counselling services for children [www.kenziesgift.com](http://www.kenziesgift.com).

## WHĀNAU TAUTOKO SUPPORT FOR WHĀNAU

**The Child Cancer Foundation.** CCF provide support support to caregivers of children up to the age of 20 and siblings under 13. This includes peer support through parent groups and sibling activities and includes practical support through the Family Support Team. Phone **0800 424 453**.

**The Cancer Society.** Provide support to partners and caregivers of young people over the age of 18. They have a range of online booklets and resources for family members along with online and in person groups for whānau and caregivers. **www.cancer.org.nz** or **0800 424 453**.

**CanTeen.** Provide online counselling for parents, partners and siblings of young people with cancer and activities for siblings age 13-24. **www.canteen.org.nz** or **0800 2268 336**.

**Leukaemia & Blood Cancer New Zealand.** Information for patients and family members. **www.leukaemia.org.nz** or phone **0800 15 1015**.

**Whānau Ora.** Culturally-based, whānau-centred support with a focus on whānau wellbeing. Check out the website to see which services are available in your area. **www.whanauora.nz**.

**National Family Services Directory.** Information about whānau support services in your area. **www.familyservices.govt.nz**.

**Engage New Zealand.** An online directory with services across Aotearoa for the refugee and migrant community. **www.engagenz.co.nz**.

**The AYA Cancer Network Aotearoa.** Check out the Young Person and Whānau sections for online booklets and resources. **www.ayacancernetwork.org.nz**.

Self Check In	Yes / No
I am able to talk to my whānau and friends about my feelings	
I feel able to share with my whānau what I need from them	
I know where whānau can go for support	
I have some sentence starters to talk about cancer with others	

Notes



## Notes

