

# COPING WITH CANCER

7 steps to handle the emotional  
and mental impact of cancer



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## Introduction

Cancer is a unique experience. There are hundreds of different types of cancer, they can be caught at different stages, and will require different tests and treatments. Unfortunately, there isn't a one-size-fits-all cure. On top of that, your treatment experience and your response to the treatment can range from *dreadful* to *excellent*. Clearly, our experiences of cancer cannot be compared like for like, but there are common physical, emotional and mental responses that most people can relate to.

I'm Juliette Chan, a Grief Recovery Specialist®, currently writing a book on how to handle the psychological impact of cancer. I had cancer in 2016 and during my cancer experience and book research, I noticed that general advice on dealing with the emotional impact of cancer was vague and lacking in practical tips.

In this book, I've pulled together 7 practical steps so that you can work through the emotional aftermath of cancer and find peace of mind. These steps will also help any of you who are caring for someone who has had cancer or is facing cancer.

## The Cancer Conveyor Belt

To start with, there's the news that you have CANCER. Then, it's a series of tests, consultations and treatments. Add to that the stress of breaking the news to your family and friends, of having to handle their reactions, opinions and advice, and of keeping them up to date. If you're lucky, you survive the cancer conveyor belt to live another day - although the regular check-ups and tests to monitor you can bring back some uncertainty. Or maybe you are still living with cancer. Perhaps it's come back or it's spread.

In my experience, and that of others I've interviewed for my book, cancer patients are generally better prepared for the physical side-effects once the treatment is over: it is recognised that there may be ongoing pain, fatigue, nausea and so on; it is understood that you need to rest frequently and that your physical capabilities may be limited for a while; and it is accepted that time will help your body to heal.

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However, most cancer patients are ill-prepared for the psychological impact of the cancer conveyor belt, which relates to the mental and emotional impact of your experience. Your thoughts and the emotions are interlinked; one affects the other.

At different stages of the conveyor belt, you experience a range of thoughts and emotions: mood swings, brain fog and fatigue are common side-effects. You may feel 'depressed', lost, lonely, angry, resentful, vulnerable, confused or unsettled, or you might just feel empty or numb.

Often there's increased anxiety over returning to work or mounting financial pressures; or perhaps you're just generally more anxious altogether. You may find yourself out of sync with your family and friends. And, there may be the worry of the cancer returning.

What are you these feelings and thoughts about? Why do they happen? Well, it's because the cancer conveyor belt not only involves coping with the disease - it also means experiencing and dealing with loss.

### Loss

Loss usually involves a change in your life where something is now different, not as it was. This could be the loss of a person (e.g. death, divorce/separation, children leaving home); losing something you value (e.g. your pet, a treasured possession, trust in a person); or, a significant change in your circumstances (e.g. cancer and other major illnesses, losing/changing jobs, moving home).

Experiencing cancer means facing a bundle of changes and losses. The most obvious one is the potential loss of life. There may also be loss of identity, control, income, future plans, peace of mind, relationships, libido, trust in the body, trust in the medical system, confidence, energy, feeling of being attractive, and much more. Some specific cancers like breast, ovarian, cervical, prostate and bowel cancer can leave you feeling 'less of a woman' or 'less of a man'.

Is it therefore any wonder that you feel a range of intense emotions and thoughts?

## Mental Response to Cancer

At a basic level, when you're faced with a significant change, especially a potentially life-threatening experience like cancer, your mind's instinct is to protect you so you go into the fight/flight/freeze response, commonly known as the survival mode. Think about how a wounded animal behaves; the primal human response is no different. At various times, you'll respond using different combinations of these three modes, but most of us have a preferred mode. The extremeness of your response will also vary.

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*Fight – here, you simply don't want the grief to be present. You may think "I don't want to feel sad/upset/anxious/..." "Why me?" "Why am I feeling like this? I should be ok now." "I want life to be as it was before my cancer."*

*Flight – you put a mask on and run away from the painful and messy emotions. You tell yourself that you don't have time or energy to deal with this. You put on a brave face and get on with life. You distract yourself by being busy. You aren't stop because if you do, then you might just get emotional – and you don't want that!*

*Freeze – you're stumped and become indecisive. You struggle to get out of bed or do anything. You give up. You maybe find it difficult to motivate yourself. Your anxiety levels are higher than usual and you may be pre-occupied with "What if it comes back?"*

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With the survival part of your brain engaged, it's difficult for the rest of your brain to function. There is literally little room for you to think. Thoughts relating to fight/flight/freeze go round and round your head. Survival can be exhausting.

The survival response is an important function to keep you alive and keep you going in difficult situations. It is useful in the short term. However, to work, the survival response requires you to ignore, suppress, avoid or fight your feelings because it doesn't want you to feel bad or experience extreme and painful emotions. In the long term, this can lead to psychological issues because emotions don't disappear unless you deal with them.

## Emotional Response to Cancer

Since dealing with cancer means facing a number of losses, the range of emotions you're experiencing is in fact "grief".

Many people wrongly associate grief with bereavement only. But grief is the natural and normal response to any loss. Grief can leave you feeling overwhelmed, like you're on a roller coaster, or the emotions may hit you in waves. You can also feel numb or empty.

Grief happens whether or not the change is planned/unplanned or conscious/unconscious, because it is present whenever you are adjusting to a new situation. Its intensity will depend on how significant the change is, what else is happening in your life, other stresses, your previous experience of other significant losses and how much support you have access to. Whatever your situation, embracing grief is key to your whole recovery and moving forward from cancer.

Normal. Natural. Healing. Finding ways of moving forward that make sense to you. Emotional clear-c  
**Grief** OK not to be OK sometimes. Suffering is part of life. Emotional completion. Healthy. Compassion. Permission.

Grief is an emotional response so it is usually messy and painful. No-one can predict what feelings will come up, how intense they will be, when they come up and how long they stay. If these emotions are not dealt with, your mental and physical well-being can be affected.

Being emotional however, is not something that most people are comfortable with in this day and age. It's inconvenient and perhaps you'd rather not experience any emotional pain.

Being emotional is often labelled as 'not being strong'.

Mainstream society encourages you to be the best physically and mentally and this is often closely linked to 'being professional' or 'being in control'. You're congratulated when you solve problems or pass exams, and you're praised when you look good, get promoted at work or succeed financially.

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But what happens when you're going through tough times and feeling really sad or angry? What about when you're experiencing such anxiety and fear that you can't describe it to others? Usually, mainstream society is unhelpful. The common message is "we're not comfortable when you feel negative; we like you to be 'fine'."

People might avoid you and cross the road so they don't have to talk to you because they don't know what to say. Others will just avoid asking you about your cancer because they don't want to upset you and remind you of a horrible experience. Then there are those, and I have met a few, who refuse to talk about cancer because it would attract the 'wrong vibes' and they might get it!

Close family and friends often want to help. They want you to be happy and to feel better, so they say try to encourage you with advice like:

*"Come out for a drink and drown your sorrows. You'll feel better."*

*"Don't worry; worry doesn't get you anywhere."*

*"Think positive."*

*"Just let it go."*

After cancer, people might say:

*"Don't feel anxious. You should be grateful you survived; others didn't."*

*"If you worry about the cancer coming back, then it will!"*

*"Don't be blue. You should be happy that it's gone."*

This leaves you in conflict. You're grieving but people are telling you that you **should** feel better/grateful/happy, etc. So you then might start to think that there's something wrong with you because you **can't** feel better/grateful/ happy, etc.

You then say to yourself:

*"Why aren't I feeling good? I shouldn't be feeling low... I must be depressed... I should be grateful... I shouldn't be wallowing... I need anti-depressants... I'm going 'crazy'..."*



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A common response is to close yourself off from others because it feels 'too much'. You worry more and more about what's wrong with you because you're not feeling like people think you should feel. You isolate yourself and these thoughts go round and round and round.

Or, you may do what makes society (and you) feel more comfortable - you bury or ignore your grief and just get on with life. "I'm fine" you say, "No drama here."

### **"How are you?"**

Scared. Distressed. Fed-up. Tired. About to cry. Worried. In pain. Fragile. Bitter. Numb. Confused. Lonely. Vulnerable. Empty. Going 'crazy'. Angry. Down. Lost. Sad. Unsettled. Defeated. Disillusioned. Anxious. Losing it. Run-down. Disturbed. Upset. Failed.

### **"I'm fine."**

You might knowingly put on a mask and pretend that you're feeling fine. Sometimes, you might actually fool yourself into thinking you're feeling ok and blindly get on with life.

Based on my own experience and having supported hundreds of grieverers over the years, I know that emotions don't just go away like that. Unlike physical scars, time and rest will not heal you emotionally.

It can sometimes seem that the grief has gone as you get used to the loss, but unless you have actively grieved, the buried emotions stay there and may surface months or years later when you experience another major life change.

Unresolved grief is cumulative. If you continue to ignore, avoid or bury your emotions, they sometimes develop into physical ill-health. Sometimes they turn into mental ill-health. Often, they are expressed in behaviours such as comfort eating, binge-drinking, addictions or obsessive behaviours.

That's because grief has a purpose; it's your natural emotional aftercare so if you don't allow it to happen, it will come out sideways.

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Just like the body's immune system helps you recover physically, grieving is your mind's way of helping you recover emotionally and mentally from a loss. Imagine how ill you would be if you stopped your immune system working!

If you stop yourself grieving by burying, avoiding or ignoring the emotions, then you stop your ability to have a clear-out and to recover naturally. This could potentially store up trouble for you in the future.

### Grief v/s Survival

Having cancer usually means that your head and your emotional heart are in very different places and pulling you in different directions. They are in conflict.

In our modern society, we live mostly from the mind. Think of conversations you have with family, friends and colleagues. How often do people talk about how they are feeling? On the whole, it's mainly about thoughts and opinions. We solve problems, plan, organise, give opinions, advise, etc.

When your head and heart are in conflict, the chances are that your head is leading the way and dominating your day. Your heart is given little attention. To tackle the psychological impact of your experience, it's important for your head and heart to be working together. It's therefore essential to turn down the volume in your head so that your emotions can be heard.

For example, a common piece of advice given is to 'think positive'. This implies that positive thinking will deal with your emotional turmoil. It won't; not when you are faced with a life-changing or traumatic situation. 'Think positive' is asking your brain to override your feelings so it's not a good strategy here. It's ignoring your emotions and asking you to put on a mask. It's asking you to lie to yourself.

Instead, what you need to do is to grieve with an *authentic mindset*. You need to be honest about how you feel, what you think and where you're at right now – whether it's good or bad. This may be scary, painful and unfamiliar. It will certainly require you to have courage, to be committed and to be truthful to yourself. It is worth it though, as grieving will release your pain.

Grieving allows you to have an emotional clear-out. It is our natural way of handling loss and the associated emotional pain. As thoughts affect feelings and feelings affect thoughts, dealing with your emotions will help your mental state.

As you grieve, the survival brain stands down, your mind becomes calmer and you then have the mental capacity to think more clearly and function better as you go about your daily life.

### How to grieve

Like the cancer experience, everyone's grief is individual and our experiences cannot be compared - but whilst your emotions may be packaged differently, elements of your grief will be recognisable to other grievers.

Over the years, I've found that these steps have helped grievers the most when they first started facing their grief and I'd like to share them with you here.

#### 1. Say hello

Recognise that you're experiencing grief. Understand that you may experience a range of conflicting, intense and painful feelings and reassure yourself that these are natural and normal, because you've gone through or are going through cancer which can be a scary and unsettling experience.

Remind yourself that there is nothing medically wrong with having these strong and unpredictable feelings or with a feeling of emptiness or numbness; it's grief. Hello Grief.

#### 2. Be self-compassionate

Compassion for yourself is key when coping with the psychological impact of the cancer experience.

When grieving, you may unwittingly find ways of beating yourself up by comparing yourself to how you were before you had cancer.

*"I'm usually so well-organised, why can't I get it together?"*

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*"I'm the strong one in the family – everyone usually comes to me. I need to be strong for others and I can't let them know if I'm having a bad day. I don't want to worry them."*

*"I've always been a calm person but now people irritate me. What's wrong with me?"*

Self-compassion is worth exploring on its own because many of us label ourselves as 'I'm a copier'. This is the most common argument I come across in grieverers who are struggling emotionally.

*"I'm a copier, so I should be able to cope with this and get back to normal right away."*

This superhero persona is widespread because from an early age, people are rewarded and praised if they show their parents, teachers and peers that they can cope. Copiers equate coping with being strong, and their logic then says that "not coping" and needing help is therefore weak. Copiers are usually uncomfortable with being vulnerable or being seen to be vulnerable.

Clearly, the ability to cope is a good life skill to have, but extrapolating that to "I must be able to cope with EVERYTHING" is not logical and it's really unhelpful when life throws you a major curve ball like cancer.

An experience like cancer usually makes you more vulnerable because you have to rely on medical staff and family and friends throughout your treatment. There's more uncertainty than you're used to and more anxiety as you wait for various test results and treatment outcomes. For those of you who are used to being in control or independent, this is not an easy place to be.

After treatment, copiers tend to then think that they can immediately get everything back to normal or that the sooner everything is back to how it was, the better.

Copiers are the most likely to ignore or bury their grief, put on a mask and get on with life. They are also the most likely to hit a barrier further down the line and experience an emotional break-down.

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If this is you, there are two points for you to consider:

- 1) BC and AC - your normal life before cancer isn't exactly the same as your normal life after cancer. It can't be. Your cancer experience means that you and others around you will feel differently and see life differently. Sometimes it's a dramatic difference, sometimes it's very subtle; mostly it's somewhere in between the two extremes. Either way, you are facing a new normal, so you now need to adapt to this and figure out what it looks like and how you live post-cancer, or maybe how to live with cancer. Grieving is a normal and essential part of this adjustment.
- 2) Copers are often under the misconception that they aren't coping because they sometimes feel low, moody, indecisive, confused, anxious and so on. The point is, grieving is a human being's natural and normal coping-mechanism when faced with a significant change. So you are coping, but it doesn't look like the coping you've been used to, where you feel in control and breeze through life.

But for right here, right now, you are coping. You've experienced cancer, you might be feeling more vulnerable or unsettled, and you're now adjusting by grieving – that is coping and it's OK.

Whether or not you're a coper, compassion for yourself is important. It isn't wallowing or being a hypochondriac; it's reminding yourself that you are facing a new normal and it's ok not to be ok sometimes.

It's accepting that you have some emotional side-effects that you need to deal with and it's normal, healthy and ok.

It's recognising that asking for help is not a weakness – even superheroes need help when the going gets tough. And experiencing cancer is tough.

The quickest way through the emotional turmoil is to turn down the internal judge and jury and to be kind to yourself.

Be compassionate and give yourself permission to grieve.

### 3. Take time-out

If you have a busy life filled with commitments with family, work and friends; hobbies; visits to the hospital or GP; and so on, it can be hard to find the time to grieve. Sometimes you may not be busy but you distract yourself by doing mindless things like watching TV or cleaning so that you don't have to think or feel. It's easier not to think because if you think, you might have to face some uncomfortable feelings or thoughts.

Make a commitment to have some time-out every day to check your psychological health. This can be challenging as your survival brain might kick in because it wants to protect you from your sad, scary or confusing feelings and thoughts. You might suddenly find an urgent need to do something else!

But making a conscious effort and taking the time to pay attention to and listen to what's going on with your feelings gradually teaches your brain that you're ready to grieve and that this is ok and safe. You might struggle at the beginning but stick with it and it will become easier.

Find a relaxing place where you will not be disturbed, sit quietly and check-in. How are you feeling?

### 4. Make friends with your emotions

Pay attention to the response: what emotions or thoughts are coming up? Say hello to them, however scary or upsetting. It's ok. Get to know your grief so that it becomes familiar by naming the emotions that come up and accepting them.

Think about the last week: What's been going on? What's upset you or hurt you? Have you felt overwhelmed or numb? What thoughts are going round? The more honest you are, the more you will benefit from this exercise.

You don't need to analyse or try to figure anything out. You don't need to understand 'Why?' or 'What does it mean?' – that's just your brain trying to distract you from *feeling*.

Simply note what is going on. Don't hold on to the emotions and try to make sense of them. You're not fighting, ignoring, judging, fixating on, or running away from your

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emotions; you're just hanging out. Just allow the emotions to arise and notice them. Let your brain know that it's ok to feel like this. This will soothe your survival brain.

If you're not used to tapping into your emotions, it might help you to draw up the table below. Jot down your answers to the questions in the box below – don't analyse or think too hard. Let it flow naturally from the heart.

Examples of situations where I have felt overwhelmed or not in control:	My emotions: what were the main feelings I experienced?

If you have very intense emotions or thoughts, this may be particularly difficult to do in the early stages, but do your best to stick with it. If tears come, let them. If there are no tears, that's ok too. Know that as you become better friends with your inner feelings, you will find greater peace of mind.

It's important to label the emotion correctly. Commonly, grievors say they are 'depressed' but this is usually inaccurate and therefore unhelpful. Depression is a clinical diagnosis. Grieving can seem like depression but grief is natural and it is not a medical condition.

It is ok to feel intense confusing emotions after a significant experience like cancer and it does not necessarily mean that you are depressed. Unless you have been diagnosed with depression, don't use this word. It may be that you're in fact sad, blue, anxious, lonely, isolated, frustrated, angry or afraid. It's important to recognise the feeling accurately so that you can clear it out.

Some of you may also be worried about opening up a 'can of worms'. Many grievors say to me, "If I open up to my emotions, I'm worried that I won't be able to cope, I'll wallow in my emotions and become depressed." This concern is based on a lack of understanding of grief and in fact, the opposite is true – you're much more likely to wallow or become depressed if you don't face your emotions and open up.

I've never encountered a griever who wallowed or became depressed because they opened up. Yet, I've encountered hundreds of grievors who became stuck or depressed because they had fought, ignored, buried or ran away from their emotions in the past.

Making friends with the feelings that arise is the start of your emotional aftercare. “Yes, it’s horrible and painful to feel like this, but it’s ok.”

### 5. Express your grief

As you become more tuned in to your inner thoughts and emotions, find ways of expressing them externally in a safe way so that you clear them out.

**Talking** to others is a great way to start, but you must choose your listener very carefully. It isn’t helpful to you if your listener is judgemental or critical or if they tell you how you should or shouldn’t be feeling and thinking. Even if they too have experienced cancer, your experience is unique so no-one else knows exactly how you feel. They should be there just to hear you and maybe give you a hug if you need one.

It’s tricky to find a good listener because most of us like to fix others, analyse and solve their problems and we love to be helpful. But there is no problem to be solved here – you’re just grieving and you have a need to express what’s going on internally. That’s all.

If you can’t find a good listener, use a cancer helpline or a mental wellbeing helpline – these are staffed with trained listeners and you’re free to simply offload. It might feel strange at first, but they are trained to put you at ease and will give you the time and attention you need to share what’s going on without judging you or wanting to fix you.

**Creative tools** like writing, painting, sculpting, etc, are also commonly used to express grief. Blogging, tweeting and sharing on other social media are increasingly popular.

Others prefer more **active** ways such as walking, running or dancing. I know griever who make bread when they feel blue as they find the kneading action therapeutic. Experiment and find what works for you.

Whatever you do, make sure that it is a channel for you to express your thoughts and emotions and not an activity that distracts you from them. For example, I might go for a jog and whilst running, I make sure I focus on whatever emotions need to be cleared; I may talk to myself or even cry as I run. As the emotions are expressed, I then find that, naturally, I feel better, calmer, and find myself enjoying the scenery or architecture around me.

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One tool that is very useful if you have dark or scary thoughts and emotions, is the written rant. It may be that you harbour deep hatred, resentment, anger towards a person, an institution, a situation or your cancer; or that you are terrified about the future or of dying; or that you have regrets about things that you've said and done in the past; or something else dark and scary. These can arise as part of grief so they are normal and natural. However, it can sometimes be harder to express them to another human being because we're scared of being judged or of worrying them.

The written rant works because the paper doesn't talk back to you and doesn't judge. It's simple yet very effective. However it will only work if you commit to destroying what is written straight away once you've finished. This is important psychologically as you are now free to express yourself knowing that no-one will ever read this. Your subconscious mind now knows it's safe to get it all out.

### **The Written Rant**

Grab some scrap paper and just start writing. Express whatever comes up. If you're not sure how to start, just begin with "Right now, I feel... / I'm thinking about... / Dear...". It will then flow. It's important to note that this is not a creative exercise so you're not concerned about punctuation, spelling, paragraphing or it making sense! If you end up scrawling your pen over the paper in a fit of anger, that's fine. If you cry or don't cry, not a problem. You're just ranting, and whatever comes out is ok.

If you struggle to write, it's probably because you've lost touch with your emotions and your intellect has taken over. Don't judge yourself as you write as that will hinder you. Be still, bring to mind the situation and feelings you want to focus on, and listen to what is going on inside. Then start ranting again. Often, as you clear the negative emotions, your writing becomes less of a rant and is more rational towards the end. That's fine.

When you have nothing more to say, stop. Don't force it. Don't read it again. Destroy the papers immediately and do something soothing or enjoyable. You can repeat this as often as you need to for the same issue or for different issues.

## 6. Treat yourself

Grieving can be tough because you are facing your fears and perhaps exposing unfamiliar emotions that leave you with a sense of vulnerability. Feeling drained and

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exhausted is a normal and natural part of this, so it's important for your recovery that you balance out the grieving with something you enjoy.

Nurturing yourself can be as simple as having a relaxing bath, sitting in the garden, going for a walk, listening to music or an audiobook, watching a fun film or spending time with people who make you feel good. Your physical abilities may be limited by the side-effects of your treatment, but finding daily treats, however small, that make you smile will help you emotionally and mentally.

As your physical strength returns, you clearly have more options. It's then worth bearing in mind the [\*Five Ways to Wellbeing\*](#) developed by *nef* (the new economics foundation) when looking for ideas to improve your wellbeing. Choose treats that mean you are:

- Connecting with people
- Being active
- Learning
- Taking notice
- Giving

### 7. Take Action

Suffering is part of life so it's essential for you to learn how to handle it by grieving so that it does not overwhelm your life and you're free to live well. Why is this important? Because ignoring the emotional and mental impact of your cancer experience is not only costly to you, but also to your family, friends, colleagues, employers and wider community. Take action.

You've read the six steps above, now take the last step: make a commitment to yourself and take action. Identify when and where you can sit quietly without being disturbed. Plan it and make it part of your daily routine. Say hello to your grief, make friends and express your grief. Then do something that makes you smile and feel good about yourself.

Share this book with those around you so that they can support you. As you handle your grief, you may also find that you are better able to talk to those who care about you. You will find that you find it easier to tell them about how you're doing.

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These 7 steps may be enough to help you get through the emotional and mental aftermath of cancer treatment or living with cancer. However, because we are all unique, you may still struggle because there might be other factors complicating your cancer grief such as past trauma or loss that are still unresolved and are limiting you. If that's you, you aren't alone and help is out there. Like cancer treatment, there isn't a one-size-fits-all and different types of help will work for different people depending on their situation.

Many of the national and local cancer charities provide a range of support from helplines, group support and workshops. A simple web search will give you their details. If you want to see a psychotherapist or a counsellor, ask your doctor or the [British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy](#).

You can also contact me. Having had cancer in 2016 and having helped hundreds of grievers since 2012, I now specialise in teaching people like you how to release any emotional pain and find a way forward after cancer treatment. I am trained to deliver The Grief Recovery Method, which is an action-based educational programme. It equips you with a *toolkit for grief* so that you can complete any unresolved grief that may have accumulated as a result of a series of losses over the years, such as illness, bereavement, divorce/break-up, pet loss, job loss and other significant life changes.

I also provide bespoke programmes and training that help you grieve and 'let go' so you can live the life you want. I provide support face to face, online or over the phone via one to one programmes, group programmes, workshops and retreats. The first step is to contact me for a free informal 20-minute chat. Call +44 (0)7742 236 970 or if you live outside the UK, email [info@altereddawn.co.uk](mailto:info@altereddawn.co.uk).

Finally, I'd love to hear how you got on with these 7 steps, so please do email me with some feedback or examples of what has helped you.

*Wishing you good physical, mental and emotional health,*



*Juliette Chan*  
Grief Recovery Specialist®



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## About Juliette

Juliette Chan is the founder of Altered Dawn and specialises in helping men and women get past the emotional and mental impact of their cancer experience.

She has helped hundreds of bereaved people since 2012 and is a Certified Grief Recovery Specialist®. Following her personal experience of the cancer conveyor belt in 2016, Juliette was able to use her expertise and experience of handling grief to help her cope with the psychological aftermath. She is now on a mission to teach others to not only deal with the psychological turmoil, but to find peace of mind and clarity so that they can turn an extraordinary experience like cancer into an extraordinary life.

Juliette is currently writing a book on how to deal with the psychological impact of cancer and is running a series of workshops and retreats on this topic in 2018.