

My husband has been diagnosed with a slow, but untreatable, cancer. He says he wants to carry on as normal, but actually he's becoming moody and irritable.

What can I do?

Psychotherapist **Alf McFarland** faces such questions all the time. Here he discusses how to cope with life's ups and downs

None of us gets through life without facing a serious loss of some kind from time to time. We usually become skilled at problem-solving – weighing up the pros and cons of courses of action and then deciding what to do. But sometimes a card is dealt to us that we can't simply set about sorting out, such as serious illness or bereavement. Then we can be really thrown, because we cannot just put it right in the way we have always done.

Losses are always involved in such situations. Sometimes the loss is painfully obvious, as in bereavement, sometimes less so. Serious illness, for example, can focus our minds on arranging treatment and sorting out practical details, which is right and sensible. But we also need to recognise the losses involved and allow ourselves to mourn.

We become so accustomed to sorting out difficulties that the shock of finding that we cannot put something right can be disturbing and painful in itself. The loss of our perception of ourselves as being in control and therefore invulnerable and safe, is a subtle loss that can be difficult to accept. Most of us really do go through life thinking that serious illness happens only to other people.

Taking notice of our different feelings and thoughts at such a time – being “real” – actually helps. As someone has said: “The thing we fear most is fear itself.”

I would include not only fear, but emotional pain. We live most

of our lives largely out of touch with our own depths, and for that reason we are afraid, for our depths are unknown to us. As children, our emotions were much closer to our awareness – from minute to minute we experienced fear and hurt as well as delight and excitement, very intensely. In adulthood we learn to hide our true, vulnerable selves from others. But in so doing we lose touch with the core part of who we really are. The critical experiences of our lives bring fear and pain, and with them, potentially, the rediscovery of what it is to be truly alive.

Painful experiences are a part of the means by which we mature as individuals. It is often said that it is our mistakes, our failures, which develop in us the maturity to succeed later. “From the ashes of disaster grow the riches

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of success.” But it is hard when faced with profound losses to see where the benefit can lie. The growth which comes is often quite different to all our previous experiences of development.

The striking thing about the pearl which grows in response to the hurt that the oyster suffers is that the pearl is quite unlike anything the oyster has produced before.

For the reason that, in living through a deep crisis, each of us can be in unfamiliar territory,

I think turning to someone is often helpful. This can be someone close to us, who is perhaps going through the pain with us. Unfortunately, in families, this is not always possible. The stiff-upper-lip approach is often a well-meaning attempt not to upset the family.

We can delude ourselves into believing that they're not terribly upset already, and that we must not get upset because that will make it harder for them to bear. But this can mean that everyone has to manage their distress and fears on their own. People then often turn to alcohol or anti-depressant drugs to try to damp down painful feelings.

However, if we can dare to enter into the experience of all the feelings which surge through us at such times and share them with those who love us, it can bring about a deep experience of love and care. It is through the rough times that people often find out what is most important to them, and that the relationships with our loved ones are strong enough to carry us through even the worst experiences.

If it is not possible to share the experience with those around us, it may be best to look for help elsewhere. The family doctor is for many of us the first port of call. Many GPs have counsellors linked with their practice.

Cruse Bereavement Care is a national charity that gives information and support for people who have experienced a deep loss. It has a good website, www.cruse.org.uk, a helpline (0844 477 9400) and local branches with volunteer counsellors.

Professional counsellors and psychotherapists can be found through their organisations – the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (online at www.bacp.co.uk, or call 01455 883300) and the United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (website www.psychotherapy.org.uk, or call 020 7014 9955). ■