

Meaning, Purpose, Values and Goals

Cancer and Meaning in Life

This section will explore questions cancer might bring up about how to live a meaningful and satisfying life, **pg.119**

Sources of Meaning

Here we will explore some common sources of meaning in life. You will have an opportunity to reflect on what gives you strength and a sense of direction in your everyday life, **pg.123**

Spirituality and Faith

This section explores your spiritual or religious beliefs and values, which for some people can be a source of support when facing cancer, **pg.128**

Summary

One-page summary for this section, **pg.129**



Tell Your Story

Everyone has a story to tell. This is a space to tell a story about you. The purpose of this exercise is to reflect on experiences in the past that may have shaped you. It is possible that reflecting on these past experiences might help provide useful direction around how to cope with the present moment and plan for the future.

Your story can take any format, order or structure you like. It can include an array of memories and experiences or can be focused on something pivotal in your past. You can write about your childhood, youth, or adult life. These stories do not need to be in any particular order. We have included some prompts below, but we hope you feel free to deviate from these if you wish.

Which activities or projects have you been the proudest of in your life? These might have involved your role as parent or family member or friend, a job you had, learning you pursued, a hobby or pastime that engaged you.

Which people have played an important role in shaping the way you think and the choices you have made in life and what was the influence they had on you? These may have been role models or people you admire, family members, teachers, community leaders, friends, or religious or spiritual leaders.

Have you ever faced a challenge, illness, or crisis, or have you had someone close to you who has? What helped you get through those difficult periods of your life?

How have these experiences influenced how you are facing your family member's cancer today and in what way?

Cancer and Meaning in Life

Cancer may cause us to pause and consider the road we have been on and the direction in which we are heading. There may be common questions that patients may ask themselves, such as: Why did the person I care for get this disease? Does our life still make sense? Have we lived our lives "properly" so far? What am I supposed to do now? What is the right way to approach cancer?

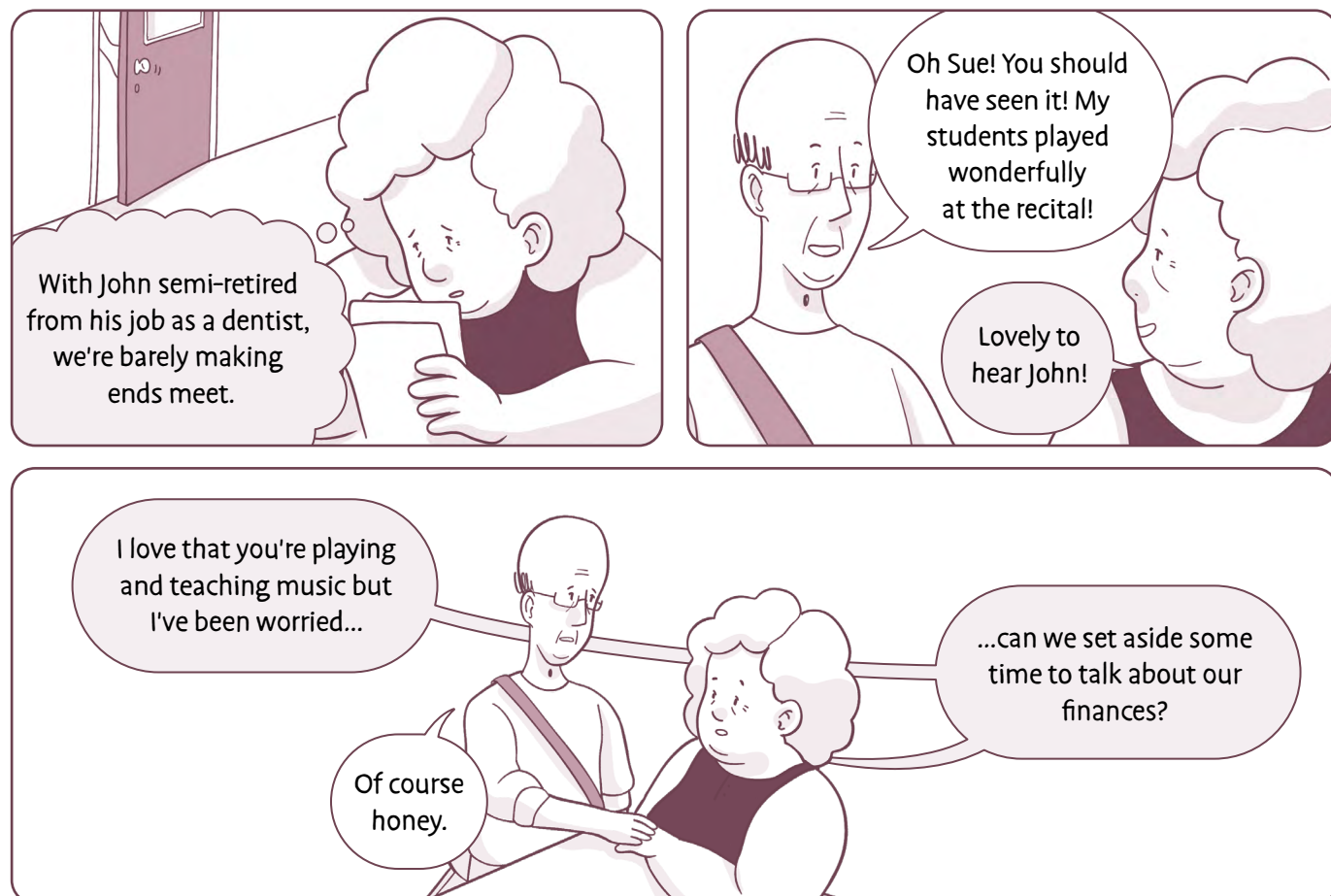
Many people find that cancer causes them to reflect on how they have lived their lives and what meaning their lives have now. Some people feel distressed at the thought that their previous

goals in life may no longer be achieved, while others may feel that cancer has helped them to clarify what is really important. Some set new priorities and value different things than before.

For caregivers of patients with cancer, similar questions may arise. Cancer can change the trajectory lives significantly. For example, shared and personal goals may no longer be a priority or be possible. For many caregivers, cancer has caused them to step back and re-evaluate their values and priorities.

John and Susanna's Story

John is a 65-year-old man with cancer of the throat that was diagnosed a few years ago. At first, he was treated with surgery and chemotherapy. He is now off treatment and monitored by his oncology team every few months.



Beth, Janice & Tom's Story

Beth is 25 years old and has metastatic sarcoma. She was diagnosed in childhood and her cancer recurred in the last year. She recently graduated from university and was about to start an accelerated nursing degree. Beth is single and was living with a roommate but recently made the difficult decision to move back to her parents' home for additional support.



Reflecting on these stories and your life...

How have important areas in your family's life been affected by cancer?

Since the person you care for was diagnosed with cancer, what changes have they made to their day-to-day life and how they spend their time? Do they spend more or less time with their family and friends? Did they continue to go to work or school? What significance does this hold for them? Have their hobbies or other past times become more or less important since their illness? How so?

How about you? How have important areas in your life changed?

Did cancer raise questions about your family member's priorities?

How about you? Did their cancer raise questions about your own priorities?

In response to these questions, have you found any useful answers, conclusions, or new directions? This might be an evolving process but take this opportunity to write down whatever comes to mind.

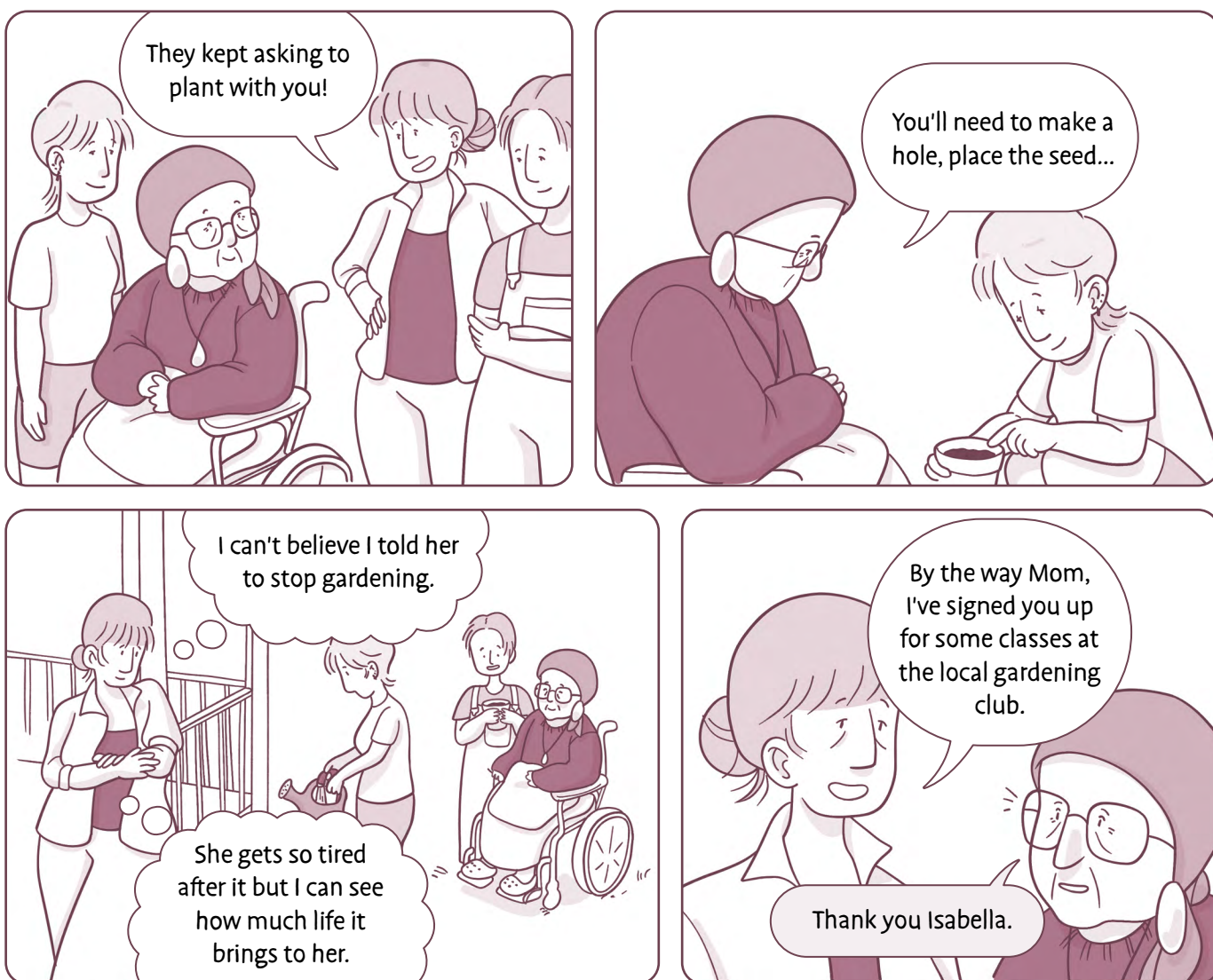
There is no right way to feel in the face of cancer. Each person copes in their own way and this may change over time. Many people find it helpful to pause to think and reflect about what is important to them in life, especially during a challenging time, even if there are no quick or easy answers.

Sources of Meaning and Purpose

Activities, experiences, projects, and relationships that are most meaningful may be different for each person. For example, working on a piece of art may bring meaning and joy to one person. And for another it can be volunteer work or time spent together with family. Others may find a lot of meaning from their job or from simple pleasures such as a beautiful view or a good meal.

Josephine and Isabella's Story

Josephine is 72 years old woman and lives with stage four breast cancer. Since she learned her chemotherapy is no longer effective, she often thinks about her garden. Josephine has spent most of her life in the garden. Every year she planted new flowers, cared for the perennials, and harvested tomatoes and vegetables. She does not always have the strength now to care for her garden due to her disease, but she still enjoys putting her hands in the earth and breathing the fresh air.



Here are some sources of meaning and purpose...

Creativity

contributes to feelings of satisfaction and wellbeing.

Gardening

Repairing a car

Woodworking

Writing

Playing music

Cooking

Painting

...& much more!

Satisfaction and well-being

may also stem from...

taking a vacation

a stimulating conversation

seeing something beautiful

encounters with a special person

being physically active

a great concert

A feeling of belonging and connection

to something greater than ourselves can be an important source of meaning for some people. A sense of connection to...

Nature

Spiritual, religious or cultural beliefs

Community

Values and outlook

on life play an important role in how we experience life.

Accomplishments

Pursuit of knowledge

Dedication to others

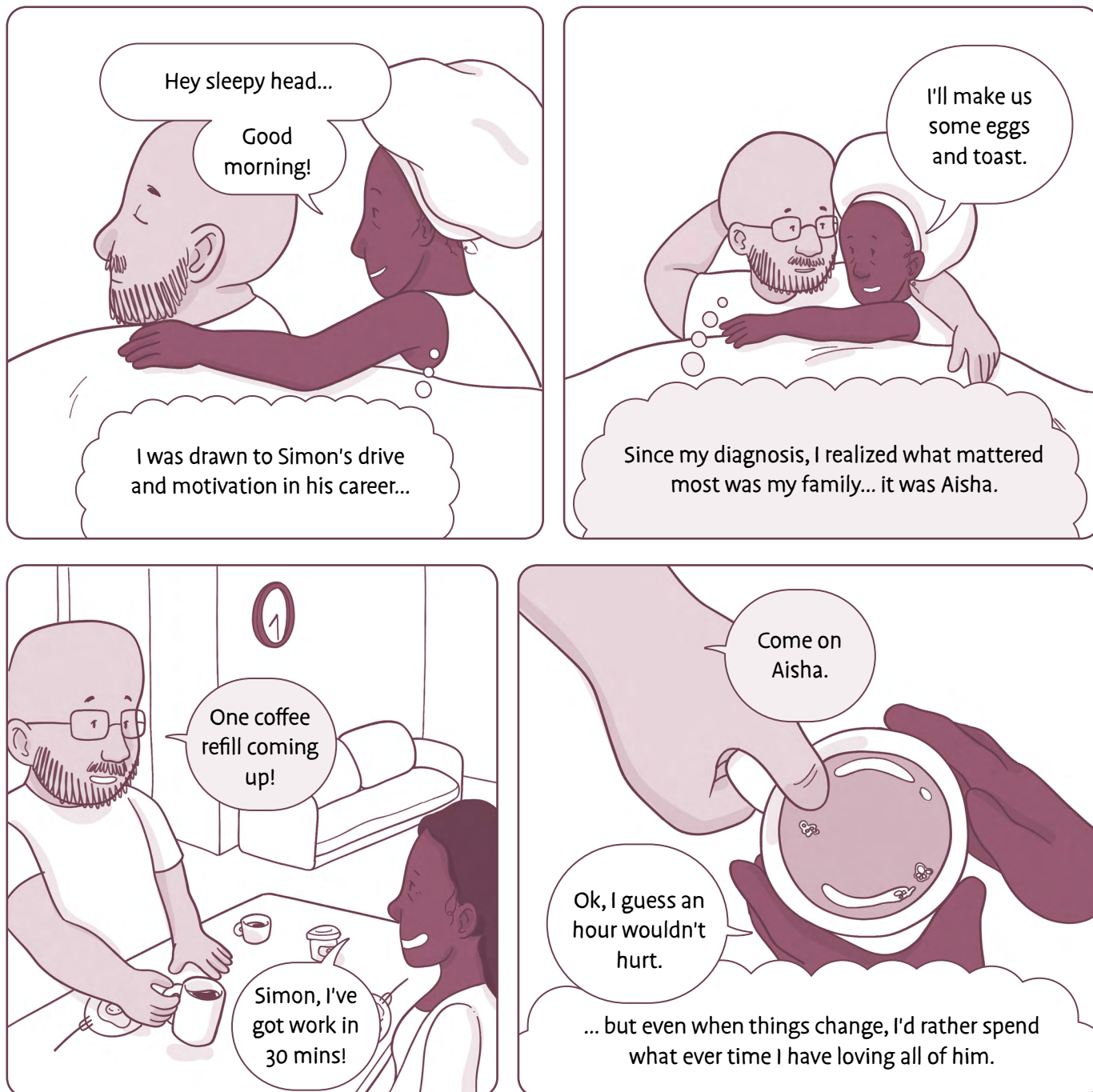
Hardwork

Care

Respect

Simon and Aisha's Story

Often, when faced with cancer both patients and caregivers may reflect on sources of meaning and purpose in life. It can also be a useful exercise to reflect and reassess what brings us meaning, purpose, joy, fulfillment, values and goals.



Reflection

Many people find that reflecting on areas of life that bring meaning and purpose can provide strength in challenging times.

Consider some of these examples when thinking about past or current goals as well as what brings meaning, purpose and joy to your life.

- Relationships/Connection to others (friendships, partners, family, etc.)
- Career
- Creativity
- Education and personal development
- Connection to nature
- Pleasurable activities
- Appreciation of beauty
- Physical well-being/ exercise/ sport
- Connection to a higher power
- Spirituality and/or faith

Which activities, experiences, projects, relationships, roles or ideas bring meaning purpose and joy to your life now?

In your past, were there sources of meaning and purpose that you might want to return?

Have there been shifts in priorities as a result of facing cancer? What are the shifts have you noticed?

What areas do you now draw strength from and give meaning to your life?

What about for the person with cancer that you care for?

Spirituality and Faith

Philosophy, spirituality and religion can provide an understanding of the way the world works and what is important, as well as a sense of connection to a higher power, 'source' or something beyond oneself. We invite you to reflect on your own values and beliefs which you may describe as spiritual or religious. Cancer often brings up important questions, such as: Why did this happen? What has my life meant? What else can I hope for? Some people find answers to these questions in their philosophy, their beliefs, or their faith.

Consider what experiences you have had with spirituality and belief.

Do you see yourself as a spiritual person? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Do you belong to a religious or faith community? What about this community/faith brings you support/comfort/meaning/joy?

Have you questioned beliefs/faith/existential ideas due to someone else's illness?

Consider how the person you care for might answer these questions?



Pause and Consider

Pause for a moment. *How are you feeling?*

Consider what you need right now. *What might help to support you in the next few minutes, hours, or the coming days?*

Summary of Domain 3: Meaning, Purpose, Values and Goals

Cancer, Life's Meaning and Telling Your Story

Cancer often prompts deep questions:

- Why did this happen?
- What matters now?
- Have I lived aligned with our values?
- What is the way forward?

You may find yourself rethinking personal and shared life goals that are now uncertain or out of reach.

It's normal for your sense of purpose or direction to shift; values may evolve as your caregiving role deepens.



Reflection Can Be a Tool for Coping

- Looking back can help you understand how past experiences shaped who you are now and what matters most to you.
- Taking time to reflect doesn't mean having all the answers—it's about reconnecting with what gives your life meaning today.

Sources of Meaning & Joy

Everyone finds meaning in different ways:

- **Relationships** (e.g., time with family, caregiving itself)
- **Creative work**, hobbies, or nature
- **Professional roles** or volunteer efforts
- **Everyday joys** (e.g., a shared meal, music, a quiet walk)

Identifying what brings you meaning—even small things—can sustain you through hard days.

Spirituality, Faith & Beliefs

Faith, spirituality, or beliefs can offer comfort and perspective:

- Connection to something larger than yourself
- A framework for making sense of suffering or change
- A place to find hope, peace, or acceptance

Reflecting on what you believe may help you feel more grounded and less alone.