

# Helping Couples Cope with Cancer: Tips for MRE Practitioners

New cancer diagnoses are expected to be around 1.5 million in 2010 (this number excludes some forms of skin cancer). The National Cancer Institute estimates that approximately 11.4 million Americans with a history of cancer were alive in January 2006. Some of these individuals were cancer-free while others still had evidence of cancer and may have been undergoing treatment. The median age of cancer patients at diagnosis is around 67 years old. While cancer research continues to identify effective treatment strategies, one known positive support is having a caring spouse. A recent study shows that married people have higher cancer survival rates than those who are divorced or separated. Receiving a diagnosis of cancer is a life changing event, not only for the person with cancer (the diagnosed partner), but also for their significant other (the well partner). As a practitioner, it is important to help your couples understand they are not alone and offer ways for them to successfully cope with cancer together so their relationship will thrive.

A cancer diagnosis is a game changer on many levels for a couple. It affects not only the diagnosed partner but also the well partner as it has financial, family, and medical implications. Cancer often becomes a daily conversation and can have the potential to damage a couple's relationship. Life happens despite cancer; there is no "pause" button. By being prepared and proactive, the experience of cancer can actually bring a couple together as a team, even in the face of a terminal diagnosis. The following tips for marriage and relationship education (MRE) practitioners offer ways to encourage couples to work together to battle the impact of cancer and maintain a healthy relationship.



## Tips

Many cancer survivors feel a sense of renewed vigor and appreciation for life that is contagious to their partner. Furthermore, the future after cancer can take a couple on a completely different path than they were on prior to diagnosis. Help the couple increase supportive behaviors within their relationship and create stability during a time that may feel out of control for them. You may want to incorporate some or all of these tips into your workshops:

*Normalize the situation.* The number of people and families impacted by cancer is huge; couples need to understand they are not alone. Talk openly about cancer by using examples in your workshop that will resonate with their current experiences, but balance your use of examples so not everything is about the cancer. Make your workshop a safe place for couples to open up to each other about what they are experiencing.

*Educate the couple.* Ensure that the couple is aware of other support systems available outside of their medical team. Cancer support groups, religious networks, family, and friends are just a few examples. These people will be essential in counteracting the potentially decreased quality of life issues for both the diagnosed and well partners. Request that the couple try to attend support groups *together* whenever possible. When that doesn't work, stress the importance of sharing what the attendee learned during the group with his or her partner to maintain communication and emotional intimacy. You can provide support group referrals to the couple or suggest doing their own research online. Building a good support network can also be beneficial in helping with financial issues and career losses. The couple may consider talking to their human resources department at work about disability, leaves of absences, and the Family Medical Leave Act.

*Navigating medical information.* Couples are likely to be challenged by understanding complicated medical terms, navigating insurance and medical care options, and making the best decisions possible. The importance of having access to the Internet cannot be overstated. There is a multitude of resources and blogs from people in similar situations. Caution the couple not to take everything online at face value. Remind them to not let learning about the disease on the Internet take away from time they could spend communicating with one another about their personal experiences. Have each partner ask questions and suggest they use the Internet as a basis for generating questions. Because there is so much information out there, it can be overwhelming and difficult for couples to tell what information is legitimate. It is important that you advise them to work with their doctor to both understand the information they find and steer them away from misinformation.

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Suggest that the couple become a “medical team” in which both partners participate in the medical care of the diagnosed partner. Ownership of the illness together will lead the couple to feeling prepared and proactive in the treatment, which in turn, keeps their relationship strong. Have the couple brainstorm ways in which the well partner can provide support to the diagnosed partner. You can even have them make lists as an exercise in class or as homework. The well partner can attend appointments, take notes, help schedule appointments, and keep track of medical records. You may want them to discuss which activities are most important to them and what their expectations are of one another.

*The importance of good communication.* As you are teaching effective communication tools, you may want to address challenges in their life that will require open and honest dialogue. For example, illness requires couples to renegotiate household rules. Offer an activity in which the couple negotiates how household roles will be met post-diagnosis. Have them create a list of roles/responsibilities and prioritize them. Encouraging them to ask for and to accept help with these items is one way for them to renegotiate roles so housework does not become the full responsibility of the well partner. This can help them avoid resentment and exhaustion. Ask the

couple to come up with a list of chores for volunteers and for the diagnosed partner to do when he or she is feeling well enough. Remind the well partner to allow the diagnosed partner to do as many routine chores as they feel up to doing. This adds a sense of normalcy and assists in providing a winning attitude in the situation.

Couples may also be facing increased financial challenges that require delicate discussions. Advise the couple to discuss what the financial demands will be in the future and prepare them that things will change now that the couple is fighting cancer. Loss of income, increased medical expenses, and additional support costs (babysitting, taxis, prepared food, etc.) are just some examples of important topics to negotiate.

Sadly, sometimes cancer is a terminal diagnosis. For a couple facing terminal cancer, the issues of the future become more important as the cancer may cause severe physical impairment prior to death. In these cases, you must stress to the couple the importance of communication. This should include talking about their living will, advanced care directives, and wishes for the future for the surviving partner and their children, if applicable.

Advise the couple to use the communication skills learned in class when discussing treatment with doctors.

*Maintain a strong connection to each other.* Explain the importance of intimacy to the couple. Have couples schedule time together where they are not to discuss the “business” of life or cancer. Tell them to be creative and flexible in new ways to connect as a couple. Allow them time to think about their other senses and talk about alternative ways to be intimate. For example, you may tell them that

holding hands is an important way to be intimate, especially as they sit in waiting rooms! It is important for the diagnosed partner to communicate his or her specific needs and limits. Clarify to the couple that the symptoms are the barrier to intimacy, not the individual, in order to avoid resentment.

Often, a diagnosis of terminal cancer brings greater focus on the patient, meeting their needs to cope and preparing for death. Though it is normal for cancer to become a daily conversation, it is important that couples take one day at a time and enjoy each day to the fullest. They should embrace the days when the diagnosed partner feels well and has energy. Influence them to take time to do the things they always wanted. Have them be creative with their ideas!

*Empathic listening.* Incorporate an activity in which the couple talks about how the cancer treatment will impact their individual lives, their schedules, and their relationship. The diagnosed partner will need support specifically around illness management. He/she will struggle with the physical impact and emotional meaning of being diagnosed with cancer as well as possible issues of body image depending on the symptoms of the cancer. For example, a woman who must have a mastectomy due to breast cancer will struggle with redefining her new body and what it means to her as a woman and as a sexual person. The well partner will need support around role clarification and feelings of loss: loss of activity, loss of partnership, and loss of self. The couple should practice empathic listening in your workshop. Make sure they understand that when they discuss these issues it can decrease the demands on each partner so they can focus on what is necessary—fighting the cancer.

*Communicating with friends and family.* It is important to strategize together safe ways to talk about the cancer and the treatment with children, family, and

friends. Being knowledgeable and prepared for any question can give the couple not only a sense of partnership, but a source of strength. Further, a couple can feel overwhelmed by well-intentioned folks who simply want to know what is happening and/or provide offers to help. Have the couple consider using a blog such as [www.caringbridge.com](http://www.caringbridge.com) to keep others informed. It can save answering the same question numerous times.

*Future expectations.* A final item the couple should remember is that they are going to be changed forever as a couple when this is over. This is very common and to be expected. There will be a new normal where they can become a stronger more vibrant couple.

Many couples are coping with cancer. You play a valuable role in helping them manage this illness. A diagnosis like cancer may bring some couples

together and could push other couples apart. MRE is an opportunity to strengthen the couple relationship as part of their treatment. By being open and honest with couples and giving them the tools to talk and connect effectively with each other, you are supporting the resiliency in their relationship.

## Additional Resources

American Cancer Society: [www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

Cancer Support Groups: [www.cancercompass.org](http://www.cancercompass.org)

National Cancer Institute: [www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov) or  
1-800-4-CANCER

Cancer Blogs: [www.caringbridge.org](http://www.caringbridge.org) or  
[www.blogforacure.com](http://www.blogforacure.com) or [www.carepages.com](http://www.carepages.com)

NHMRC: "[\*My Partner Was Just Diagnosed With a Chronic Illness... Now What?\*](#)"

See more NHMRC Tip Sheets on positive communication skills:

[Honey Did You Hear Me? Game Plan for Active Listening](#)

[Listening is Not a Spectator Sport: Rules for Active Listening](#)

[Avoiding Communication Fouls](#)

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