

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.

