

In Sickness and in Health: Couples Fighting Cancer Together

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. In 2010, 1.5 million individuals are expected to be diagnosed with cancer (this number excludes some forms of skin cancer). Receiving a cancer diagnosis is a life changing event, not only for the person with cancer, but also for their spouse or significant other.

One of the first steps to fighting cancer is to understand that you are not alone. Many couples successfully cope with cancer together and allow their relationship to thrive. Life happens despite cancer; there is no “pause” button. However, by being prepared and proactive, cancer can actually bring a couple together as a team, even in the face of a terminal diagnosis. The following tips offer ways that couples can work together to battle the impact of cancer and maintain [a healthy relationship](#).

Tips

Cancer can be an experience of resiliency, bringing you and your partner closer together. Many cancer survivors feel a sense of renewed vigor and appreciation for life that is contagious to their partner. The future after cancer can often take a completely different path than what the couple was on prior to diagnosis. Be open to the new possibilities - and especially to the hidden gifts that you may discover - while going down the path that cancer takes you. By engaging in some of the activities below, you can



increase the support between you and your partner as well as increase stability at a time when you feel like your life is out of control. Try to use active listening techniques as you discuss medical issues with doctors and nurses, and as you discuss the remaining tips with your spouse.

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](#)

Become a medical team - Forming a medical team to include each partner in medical care is important for the relationship. Ownership of the illness together will lead to being prepared and

proactive in the treatment which in turn, keeps your relationship strong. The best way to do this is for both of you to ask questions. A great source for generating questions is the internet; however, because there is so much information out there, it can be overwhelming and difficult to tell what information is legitimate. Your doctor can help steer you away from misinformation. The “well” partner can attend appointments, take notes, help schedule appointments, and keep track of medical records. Other demonstrations of solidarity by the well partner can include: following the same dietary restrictions and shaving his or her head if the diagnosed partner loses hair to chemotherapy.

Renegotiate household roles - Treatment can be devastating on the diagnosed partner’s ability to contribute to the household. Previous tasks, both individual and shared, may now fall to the well partner. This can range from working outside the home; caretaking for children; and completing all household chores like cooking and cleaning. [Negotiating how household roles will be met](#) post-diagnosis is important to the relationship. Often, the burden falls to the well partner in addition to direct impact on his or her schedule, like doctor’s appointments and caring for the diagnosed partner. Prioritizing along with asking for and accepting help is one way to renegotiate the household roles so it does not become the full responsibility of the well partner. This can help avoid resentment and exhaustion. Sit down together and come up with a list of chores for volunteers and for the diagnosed partner to do when he or she is feeling better.

Make intimacy a priority - Do not let your intimate relationship be consumed by the diagnosis of cancer. Be creative and flexible in finding new ways that you can [connect as a couple](#). Incorporate your other senses as well as experiment with alternative ways

to connect. For example, holding hands may become an important way to be intimate, especially as you sit in waiting rooms. For the diagnosed partner, it is important to communicate your specific needs and limits. For example, clarify that it is the symptoms that are the barrier to intimacy, “It’s not me or you, it’s the cancer.” Just as important as communicating about the cancer, couples need to talk about their intimate relationship. This communication in itself can lead to a greater connection.

Adjust your social life - The actual time required to fight the cancer and its symptoms can be tremendous. Your social life will have limitations due to both time and energy. You may even need to cancel events at the last minute. True friends will not only accept these limitations and cancellations, but they may also make themselves available for direct support. Despite the impact on your social life, don’t forget to have fun. You just might need to do it in a different way – nights in can be just as fun as a night out on the town. Plan dedicated, quality “no cancer” time (where cancer is not discussed). And don’t forget that laughter is the best medicine!

Utilize available support systems outside of your medical team.

Form a support network - Utilize available support systems outside of your medical team. Cancer support groups, religious networks, family, and friends are just a few examples. These people will be essential in counteracting the decreased quality of life issues for both the diagnosed and well partners. You can do your own research online to locate support groups or talk to your medical social worker for referrals. Whenever possible, attend support groups together. When this is not possible, share with your

partner what you learned during the group to maintain your communication and emotional intimacy. Building a good support network can also be beneficial in helping with [financial issues](#) and career losses. Talk to your human resources department at work about disability, leaves of absences, and the Family Medical Leave Act.

Practice empathic listening- Talk about how treatment of the cancer will impact your life, your schedule, each of you individually, and your 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 their 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. By practicing empathic listening when these issues are discussed, the demands on each partner can be decreased so that you can focus on what is necessary – fighting the cancer.

Discuss the future - 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, communication should include talking about your living will, advanced care directives, and your wishes for the future for the surviving partner and your children (if applicable). 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. Embrace the days where the diagnosed partner feels well and has energy. Make time to do the things you always wanted. Even if you can't go on a safari to Africa, bring the safari to you by going to the zoo or a museum. Be creative!

It is expected that cancer can begin to define who you are as a person and as a couple. Balance this by taking steps to make quality time for yourself and for each other. Being a good patient, improving communication and support, and facing loss and the future together are some good steps towards resiliency.

Additional Resources

American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org

Cancer Support Groups: www.cancercompass.org

National Cancer Institute: www.cancer.gov or 1-800-4-CANCER

Cancer Blogs: www.caringbridge.org or www.blogforacure.com or www.carepages.com

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

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