Coping During the Holidays: Answers to Common Questions

People with cancer and their families and friends often approach the holidays with a mixture of emotions?excitement, worry, hope, exhaustion, and happiness. You might be wondering how to maintain old holiday traditions, handle the extra stress and social commitments of the season, or remain upbeat and optimistic. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to coping with cancer during the holidays, here are some helpful answers to common questions asked by people living with cancer as well as those who care about, and for, them.

Questions from people living with cancer

Q: How should I manage fatigue during the busy holiday season?

A: First, discuss any change in your energy level with your doctor. Then, make a list of the events you usually participate in and choose the favorites you would like to continue. You may want to talk with family and friends about combining events (such as decorating the house and making holiday goodies) or changing locations to reduce your travel. In addition, ask your family and friends for help. For example, if you would like to host a holiday dinner but don't have the energy to cook and decorate, ask family and friends to help with some of the tasks, such as grocery shopping [1]. Or, get help with household tasks to save time for more enjoyable activities. Some online communities [2] offer tools to help people with cancer and their friends and families coordinate tasks. Finally, don't be afraid to say no. Some people find that they have a new appreciation for simpler, smaller gatherings. Make this holiday season about rediscovering peace and happiness in old and new ways. Learn more about coping with cancer-related fatigue [3].

Q: I've finished my treatment and have a good chance of recovery, but I know others are still worried about me. How can I keep their spirits up?

A: The transition from treatment to long-term recovery can be an emotional time for family members and friends. There are many ways to reassure those who care about you before the holidays: write a letter or an email, schedule a time to meet for coffee or a walk, or let people know how you're feeling by phone. You can tell them about your follow-up care schedule and that you'll continue to keep them informed. Then, relax and enjoy yourself; others will follow your lead.

Q: I find myself feeling anxious since my diagnosis, and I'm not sure how to relax.

A: Anxiety [4] is a very common feeling. For some people it is based on worries about treatment, side effects, and prognosis (chance of recovery). For others, it is a more generalized worry that can result in panic attacks, characterized by sweating, heart palpitations, and difficulty breathing. The first step is to get clear, accurate information about your diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis. Don't be afraid to ask for this from your health care team as many times as necessary until you understand. They know the information is difficult to absorb and will review it with you until you are sure you understand. Next, when you are feeling anxious, consider talking with a friend or family member, or join a support group. Knowing that you aren?t alone can be a great relief. If you are finding that your anxiety keeps you from doing regular activities, talk with a social worker [5] or other counseling professional. Many people find relaxation techniques helpful, including deep breathing, gentle stretching, meditating, listening to music, and journaling. Some people may want to talk with their doctor about anti-anxiety medication, in addition to counseling [6].

Q: I was just diagnosed with cancer, and I can?t help but wonder what my life will be like next year.

A: After being diagnosed with cancer you may feel overwhelmed from gathering information about your disease and treatment options, making appointments, getting test results, collecting records, and managing your finances [7], especially around the holiday season. However, it is important to remember that you are not alone as you cope with your cancer diagnosis and treatment, and it is okay to express whatever you are feeling without worrying it might dampen the holiday spirit. Draw on the support of the friends and family that will surround you during the holidays. And don?t be afraid to plan for the future. You can gain perspective and a sense of control by setting goals [8] for the year ahead and thinking about the things that matter to you the most.

Questions from friends, family, and caregivers

Q: My father died last year, and I really miss him during the holidays. How can I honor his memory?

A: Other people who cared about your father probably feel the same way. Talk with them about ways to honor him, such as a memorial service, a donation in his honor, planting a tree in his name, or anything else that would have been meaningful to him. If you find others aren't as comfortable as you are with a public memorial, there are ways to privately remember what he meant to you, such as putting together a collage or memory book of

favorite pictures and cards, writing a letter to him about what he meant to you, or keeping a journal of your feelings [9]. You can also join a grief support group [10] where you can talk with other people with similar feelings.

Q: My wife has had side effects from her treatment, including losing her hair and losing some weight. How can we handle seeing people over the holidays who may not be prepared for the changes in her appearance?

A: Consider writing a letter or an email or calling family members to let them know of any changes before your visit. Make sure that she is not disconnected from support simply because people don't know the "right" thing to say. (Learn helpful tips for talking with a loved one who has cancer [11].) People who are facing a serious illness and treatment often feel isolated by others' discomfort with the situation. Let those who care about her know that, although she has gone through a difficult time, she still enjoys holiday traditions, laughter, and good company.

Q: My husband is going through cancer treatment, how do I explain to our kids that the holidays will be different this year?

A: During this time, children might start to worry that the special things their parents always do during the holidays will be affected by cancer treatment and its side effects. The key is to be open and honest about what?s going on and flexible about your holiday plans. Although kids need information about what is happening, they also need an opportunity to express their concerns and emotions. Get your children involved in prioritizing and picking holiday traditions that you want to continue as a family. Also, talk with older children about ways they might be able to help with holiday tasks, such as decorating or baking. By talking with your children about what?s happening, they can better prepare for any changes or differences that might occur this year.

Q: What are some good gifts for a person going through treatment?

A: Some of the best gifts are those that reflect who the person is apart from the cancer. Examples include concert tickets, art and craft supplies, books, music, museum passes, sporting event tickets?anything that will show you still see him or her as a person, not a patient.

Q: I'd like to volunteer somewhere over the holidays, but I don't know where to start.

A: Check with local hospitals, community agencies, churches, temples, wellness centers, or any group that is in your area and of interest to you. Cancer.Net also has a list of patient information resources [12]. Many organizations rely on volunteers, whether it?s for a regular, weekly time commitment or a one-time event. Read more about making a difference [13]. Oftentimes, though, the best place to start is closer to home. If you are the friend of a person with cancer, you can also offer to help with laundry, shopping for groceries, going to the post office, or giving a ride to a doctor's appointment. Learn more about supporting a friend who has cancer [14].

More Information

Cancer and the Holidays [15]

Traveling With Cancer [16]

Coping [17]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/24550
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24634
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24490
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25481
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/24556
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/24699
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24865
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/24583
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/24528
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[11] http://www.cancer.net/node/25310
[12] http://www.cancer.net/node/25325
[13] http://www.cancer.net/node/24581
[14] http://www.cancer.net/node/24691
[15] http://www.cancer.net/node/25304
[16] http://www.cancer.net/node/24707
[17] http://www.cancer.net/node/21