Sharing Your Story [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board [2], 06/2014

Key Messages:

- You choose whether and how much to share your cancer experience with various people in your life. In addition, you are not obligated to share the details of your cancer diagnosis with anyone who doesn?t need to know.
- Consider preparing your thoughts before sharing your story, but give yourself the freedom to say what feels right in the moment.
- Remember that people react differently to potentially difficult or upsetting news, and negative reactions are often a result of people?s past experiences, related feelings, and coping mechanisms. Surround yourself with caring people in your life who will listen and support you.

About 13 million people in the United States have survived cancer, and each person has a story to share, if he or she wishes to do so. Some people feel comfortable talking with others about their cancer diagnosis and treatment, while others prefer to keep details private. For some people, the topic may be too recent or painful to discuss without stirring up complex emotions, and others may feel uncomfortable talking about their bodies. Physical changes, such as a scar in an exposed or easily visible area, or noticeable weight and hair loss, may cause people to ask questions. Telling others about your cancer diagnosis is an individual choice, and you have the right to decide how much to share, if anything, regardless of any questions. Preparing for potential conversations or practicing how and what to say, may relieve your anxiety.

Whom to tell

First, decide if you want to talk to about your cancer diagnosis, who you want to tell, and how much you want to share, based on the nature of your relationships. For example, your employer and some coworkers [3] may need to know some but not all of the information to support a schedule change or shift in job responsibilities. Meanwhile, you may choose to share intimate details about your cancer diagnosis, treatment plan, and emotional journey with trusted friends and family members [4].

It is particularly important to be intentional in the way you talk with children in your life?your own children, nieces and nephews, or grandchildren?about cancer. Children often sense that something is wrong, even if they don't know what it is. As a result, avoiding the topic may lead them to imagine or make up their own explanations, which may be inaccurate and upsetting. Talk

with children about the cancer diagnosis very simply and concretely, using words that they can understand; listen to their concerns; and answer their questions to the best of your ability. Learn more about how to talk with children [5] and how children understand cancer at various ages [6].

You may also consider sharing your story on a larger scale to support those living with cancer, raise public awareness, advance cancer research, improve the quality of cancer care, and address legislative and regulatory issues that affect cancer care and research. Learn more about being a cancer advocate [7].

How to start

If you feel unsure about what to say, you may find it helpful to write down the details that you wish to share with specific people in your life before talking with them. As you consider what to write, anticipate questions or reactions that you may receive, and decide how you would like to respond. Some people might feel more comfortable with practicing telling the story out loud alone or with a trusted friend or family member. Others might feel more comfortable if the conversation is less rehearsed.

At the same time, give yourself the freedom and flexibility to say what feels right at the moment. You may choose to share your story one day but decide you don?t feel willing to talk about it another time. You may even change your mind about sharing once a conversation starts.

How to respond to other people's reactions

People react differently to potentially difficult or upsetting news. As a result, you may feel anxious about sharing your cancer experience, fearing the possible reactions. It helps to choose a stress-free time and environment to talk, beginning by telling the person that you have something important to share.

If a person reacts negatively?acting uncomfortable, abruptly changing the subject, or stopping the conversation?try to avoid taking it personally. This reaction likely is a result of the person?s past experiences, related feelings, and coping mechanisms. Some people simply do not know how to react or what to say. Or your story may remind them of fears they have about cancer or trigger memories of a previous challenging experience or loss.

If after you share your story, a person asks questions that feel intrusive or starts taking the conversation in a direction that feels uncomfortable to you, remember that you have the freedom to decline sharing certain information or express your desire to change the topic or end the conversation.

Although you may receive some negative reactions, you will likely be relieved to find that compassionate people in your life will encourage you to share as much of your story as you would like and that they will be happy support you. Those relationships may even grow stronger through the experience.

More Information

Communicating with Loved Ones [8]

Support Groups [9]

Additional Resource

LIVESTRONG: Meeting Others Like You [10]

Sieze the Days [11]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/survivorship/life-after-cancer/sharing-your-story
[2] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/24549
[4] http://www.cancer.net/node/25302
[5] http://www.cancer.net/node/25311
[6] http://www.cancer.net/node/25300
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/24403
[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25112
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/25383
[10] http://www.livestrong.org/we-can-help/preparing-yourself/meeting-others-like-you/
[11] http://seizethedays.org/