

[Home](#) > [Coping With Cancer](#) > [Talking With Family and Friends](#) > [Talking About Cancer](#) > Talking With Your Spouse or Partner

PDF generated on July 28, 2016 from

<http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/talking-about-cancer/talking-with-your-spouse-or-partner>

Talking With Your Spouse or Partner [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 01/2015

Key Messages:

- Couples often find it hard to talk about difficult or sad topics. This means that they may shy away from talking about the intense emotions and changes that come with a cancer diagnosis.
- It's helpful to talk openly and honestly with your spouse or partner. It is also helpful to sensitively listen to your partner's thoughts and feelings.
- You should also discuss practical concerns, such as treatment options and changes in routines, and future plans.
- Consider joining a support group or talking with a trained counselor to help you each cope in your own way.

Talking about cancer is challenging. Even couples who typically communicate well may have trouble talking about cancer because it involves intense emotions. Discussing a cancer diagnosis also involves topics that couples may not wish to discuss. This includes sexual problems, fertility concerns, physical limitations, financial worries, and even the possibility of death.

General communication guidelines

Good communication involves talking openly and honestly about your thoughts and feelings with someone who listens and supports you. It includes both sharing your experience and listening, accepting your partner's thoughts and feelings without criticism or blame. Good communication isn't easy and doesn't always come naturally. It requires practice and effort.

Here are some tips for good communication:

- Practice active listening. Active listening means you concentrate on understanding what your partner is saying, rather than thinking about what to say next. For example, restate what your partner said in your own words. Then, ask for feedback to make sure you understand your partner's point of view.
- Don't assume you know what your partner is thinking or feeling or what your partner will say next. Ask questions if something is unclear.
- Use "I" statements to describe your feelings rather than blaming your partner. For example, you may say, "I felt sad when you didn't go to the doctor's appointment with me." That statement is less likely to put the other person on the defensive and start an argument than a blaming statement.
- Be specific and clear. For example, "hurt" could mean either sad or disappointed. It's more effective to make a request than to blame or shame your partner. For example, say, "Please don't leave your socks on the floor," instead of "You're so messy."
- Avoid criticism, sarcasm, name calling, and insults.
- If you become angry or upset, finding a calming routine, such as taking a deep breath or leaving the room, can be more helpful than forcing yourself to continue.
- Take your time. One of the pitfalls of any difficult conversation is to rush. Take time to decide what you want to say, and give your partner time as well.
- Take turns talking, and don't interrupt each other.
- Focus on one topic at a time. Avoid bringing up other topics or old arguments.

- Don't expect to resolve difficult topics in one conversation. Agree to continue talking about the subject at another time.
- It may be helpful for both of you to talk with a neutral person who may be able to help work through different points of view.

Tips for talking with your spouse or partner about cancer

Cancer changes the lives of each person in a relationship, and both require support. Here are some tips that may help you talk with your spouse or partner about cancer, how it makes you feel, and how it affects you and your relationship.

- Talk about treatment and work together as you explore treatment options. While the person with cancer ultimately makes the final choice about treatment, it helps strengthen the couple if both partners have a chance to consider the options together. When possible, attend doctors' appointments together so you have shared information to go over during such conversations.
- Choose times to talk when you are both free from distractions and not rushed. Some couples find that scheduling a daily or weekly time to talk works well.
- Talk about topics you typically discuss. You don't always have to talk about cancer.
- Consider practicing what you want to say or writing notes for yourself if you have something difficult to share. This may help you prioritize your values and identify your biggest worries.
- Talk about the ways you each cope with stress to identify whether you have differing needs in conversation. For example, one partner may view cancer as a problem to be solved, while the other needs emotional support and validation. Understand that both of these responses have value.
- Talk honestly about your feelings, both positive and negative. Emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, and resentment are normal reactions to cancer. Couples often don't discuss these emotions because they fear upsetting each other or feel guilty for having negative thoughts. Hiding feelings creates distance between partners and prevents them from supporting and comforting each other. On the other hand, hearing that your partner feels guilt or sadness may also be very difficult to bear.

- Talk about differences in the way you feel, and respect your partner’s feelings. For example, at times, one of you may feel afraid while the other feels hopeful.
- Don’t be afraid to laugh. Humor may help you and your partner cope.

Tips for the spouse or partner who has cancer

- Tell your partner how you are feeling physically and emotionally. Sharing helps your partner understand your challenges and provides an opportunity for him or her to support you.
- Tell your partner about the specific types of support and encouragement you need. One day you may need encouragement to get out of the house; another day you may need some quiet time alone.

Getting help

If it is difficult to talk with your partner, you may consider meeting with [counselor](#) [3]. This person can help address communication problems and guide you through difficult conversations. Or each of you may choose to find a [support group](#) [4]—one for people diagnosed with cancer and one for caregivers. Support groups provide a setting to learn about others’ experiences communicating about cancer within intimate relationships.

More Information

[Talking About Cancer](#) [5]

[Cancer.Net Blog: Marriage and Family Therapists](#) [6]

[Communicating with Loved Ones](#) [7]

[Family Life](#) [8]

Links

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/talking-about-cancer/talking-with-your-spouse-or-partner>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25302>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/32806>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25112>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25299>