Talking With Your Spouse or Partner

This section has been reviewed and approved by the Cancer.Net Editorial Board, 4/12

The complex emotions and lifestyle changes that follow a cancer diagnosis make communication more challenging. Even couples who communicate well may have trouble talking about cancer. Talking about cancer is difficult because it involves intense emotions and topics that couples may not wish to discuss, such as sexual problems, fertility concerns, physical limitations, body-image issues, and death.

Defining good communication

Good communication involves talking openly and honestly about your thoughts, feelings, and fears with someone who listens and supports you. Good communication includes not only sharing your own thoughts and feelings, but also listening to your partner's thoughts and feelings and accepting them without criticism or blame. Good communication isn't easy, but people can learn and practice good communication skills.

Here are some tips for good communication:

- Practice active listening. Active listening is when you concentrate on understanding what your partner is saying, rather than thinking about what to say next. Restate what your partner said in your own words and 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, "I felt sad when you didn't want to go to the movies with me," instead of "You never want go anywhere with me."
- Be specific. Avoid unclear words (for example, "hurt" could mean either sad or disappointed) and talk about specific events rather than generalizations (for example, "Please don't leave your socks on the floor," rather than "You're so messy.").
- Avoid criticism, sarcasm, name-calling, and insults. Don't yell.
- Go slowly. Take time to figure out what you want to say and to find the words you want to use. Don't pressure your partner to respond quickly.
- Take turns talking and don't interrupt each other.
- Focus on one topic at a time. Avoid bringing up other topics or old arguments.
- If you become angry or upset, take a deep breath and consider taking a break until you feel calmer.
- Don't expect to resolve difficult topics in one conversation. Agree to continue talking at another time.

Tips for talking with your spouse or partner

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. Because cancer changes the lives of each person in a relationship, both partners need to talk about how cancer affects them.

- Talk about treatment options and work together to make treatment decisions. When possible, attend doctors' appointments together so you have shared information.
- Choose times to talk when you are both free from distractions and not rushed. Some couples find that scheduling a daily time to sit down and talk works well.
- You don't always have to talk about cancer. Remember to talk about normal things tooâ€"just talking helps couples feel closer.
- If you have something especially difficult to discuss, it may help to practice what you want to say or write notes for yourself.
- Because you and your partner probably have different ways of coping with stress, you may have differing needs for your conversations. One partner may view cancer as a problem to be solved, while the other needs emotional support and validation. Talk about these differences and understand that both points of view 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 for fear of upsetting the other partner or because they feel guilty for having negative thoughts. Hiding feelings creates distance between partners and prevents them from supporting and comforting each other.
- You and your partner won't always feel the same wayâ€"you may be more scared while your partner may be more hopeful. Talk about these differences and respect your partner's feelings.
- Tell your partner how you are feeling physically and emotionally. This sharing helps your partner understand your challenges and gives an opportunity for your partner to support you.
- Tell your partner often about the specific types of support and encouragement you need. One day you may need encouragement to get out of the house, while another day you may need some quiet time alone.
- Humor [1] may help you and your partner cope, so don't be afraid to laugh.

Getting help

If it is difficult to talk with your partner, you may want to join a support group [2] or seek help from a counseling professional. Encourage your partner to consider attending a caregivers' support group. Marriage counselors and couples therapists can help you address problems with communication and guide you through difficult conversations. Learn more about the benefits of counseling [3].

More Information

Relationships and Cancer [4]

Emotional and Physical Matters [5]

Caregiving [6]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Coping+With+Cancer+Through+Humor
[2] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Publications+and+Resources/Support+and+Resource+Links/General+Cancer+Organizations+and+Resources/Support+Groups
[3] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/The+Benefits+of+Counseling
[4] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Relationships+and+Cancer
[5] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Emotional+and+Physical+Matters
[6] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Caregiving