

Communicating with your Partner

Communicating with your partner about how cancer has affected you can be difficult. Even strong relationships can become strained under the pressure of managing a complex illness. Taking steps to improve your communication skills can help you to feel more supported and understood.

Communicating with your Partner: Detailed Information

This information is meant to be a general introduction to this topic. The purpose is to provide a starting point for you to become more informed about important matters that may be affecting your life as a survivor and to provide ideas about steps you can take to learn more. This information is not intended nor should it be interpreted as providing professional medical, legal and financial advice. You should consult a trained professional for more information.

Why is it important for survivors to communicate well with their partners?

A spouse or partner can be a primary source of support to a cancer survivor. However, if communication begins to break down, it can be stressful and result in low levels of support for both. While the cancer journey can be emotionally challenging for survivors, it can also be hard on loved ones. In some cases, a partner may experience more emotional distress than the survivor.

Both survivors and their partners may have strong emotions such as fear, anger and guilt. Stress is also common. A decline in the physical or emotional status of either may create a “cycle of distress” for the couple. If this happens, one person’s distress also affects the other. High levels of emotional distress can strain the relationship. Good communication may be the most effective strategy for breaking this cycle. It may also improve the quality of life for both.

Good communication skills can help survivors and their partners to:

- Receive and offer emotional support
- Get help making decisions
- Share advice and encouragement
- Learn new ways of handling stressful situations
- Clarify misunderstandings
- Learn new coping strategies
- Plan for the future, such as family, employment and financial decisions

Important issues that partners may need to discuss together include:

- Ways to solve problems with changing roles and responsibilities in the relationship
- Instructions and preferences for decisions about health care and financial matters
- Concerns about changes to sexual relations and expressions of intimacy
- Challenges adjusting to the cancer experience
- How to maintain the quality of the relationship

The cancer experience can be a time that enriches and strengthens the relationship. A partner can play a large role in shaping the emotional experience of the survivor to the experiences of cancer and life after treatment. Research shows that survivors who feel they have support from their partners are more likely to focus on the positive aspects of their cancer journey. This can improve their quality of life.

Why is it sometimes difficult for survivors to communicate with their partners?

There may be a number of reasons why it can be difficult for survivors to communicate with their partners.

A partner's negative response to the survivor's discussions may discourage open communication.

Research shows that a survivor is negatively affected if his or her partner uses criticism, withdrawal or acts uncomfortable when the survivor talks about the cancer experience. This may cause the survivor to use fewer healthy and effective coping strategies. Emotional problems can result and a cycle of distress may occur in the relationship.

Negative responses from partners that may make communication difficult include:

- The partner does not want to talk about what the survivor is experiencing because it is too upsetting
- The partner feels over-protective and tries to prevent the survivor from doing things
- The partner wants the survivor to get back to normal and try to forget that the cancer experience happened

The cancer journey may require that couples communicate about topics that they normally would not talk about. Issues, such as the side effects or aftereffects of cancer and treatment, may be difficult to discuss. For example, some survivors experience incontinence, sexual or fertility problems or changes in self-esteem and body image. These may be very hard for some people to talk about.

Long-lasting complications, such as fatigue and chronic pain, may be difficult for partners to understand. This is especially true when the survivor is in remission or looks healthy. The partner may want the survivor to move on and return to life the way it was before cancer.

Sensitive issues that may be difficult to discuss include:

- Living with uncertainty
- Stress
- Feelings of guilt
- Financial difficulties
- Dealing with fear of recurrence
- Changes in outlook on life and death
- Other health and physical problems
- Losses of all kinds including job, friends, abilities
- Changing roles and responsibilities
- New compromises that need to be made
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Anger

Survivors may feel guilty discussing certain topics with their partners.

It can be hard for survivors to ask others for help. This is particularly true if the survivor has always been the one to help others. Some may continue to try to do tasks that have become too emotionally or physically challenging.

Some survivors are worried about stress on their partners. They may feel guilty about asking partners to take on new roles and responsibilities. They may be concerned that a partner is as distressed (or more) than the survivor. A survivor may try to protect his or her partner by not sharing information. Important discussions about certain topics, such as health care directives and financial matters, may be avoided in an effort not to upset the partner.

Survivors and partners may have different priorities.

Cancer survivors and their partners may find that some things that were important to them before treatment are no longer as important. There may be a change in the way they view life. Some decide to change jobs or other relationships in their lives.

Sometimes both partners and survivors can easily understand the change in priorities and be comfortable with them. Other times, one of them might not understand why these changes are happening or may not agree with them. This can feel threatening to a relationship.

How can survivors learn to communicate well with their partners?

Couples sharing the cancer journey can learn new and effective communication strategies. Even though it can be difficult to change old habits, learning skills and developing new communication habits is possible. The key is to practice the new skills regularly. The benefit is that healthy communication can increase satisfaction in a couple's overall relationship and positively affect the quality of life for both.

Some ways to improve communication skills include:

- Being aware of your own communication patterns and behaviors
- Understanding the communication patterns and behaviors of your partner
- Learning and practicing effective communication skills together
- Taking time to discuss difficult topics with your partner
- Consulting a licensed counselor about your relationship

How can better communication benefit survivors and their partners?

There may be times when survivors and their partners have a hard time talking with one another. During times of stress, effective and healthy communication might be a challenge for couples. This can be especially difficult if there were already problems talking and sharing before the cancer diagnosis.

If communication between you and your partner is not what you would like, you may need to work on building skills. You may be able to do this together or with the help of a licensed counselor. You may want to talk with your health care team about getting a referral to a counselor who is experienced working with cancer survivors.

Signs that it is time to work on better communication with your partner include:

- Frequent misunderstandings
- Withdrawal from one another or avoidance of talking together
- Frequent use of criticism, sarcasm or name-calling
- Not sharing information with your partner
- Frequent disagreements over the same issues
- Concerns about sexual matters
- Lessening of expressions of love and affection such as talking, touching and sharing
- Confiding in others instead of the partner
- Inability to ask the partner for help or support
- Finding the support received from the partner is unhelpful
- Feeling hurt emotionally by the partner

If there is ever physical aggression in the response of you or your partner, seek immediate help. Options for professional assistance include:

- Calling 911 if you are in immediate physical danger
- Talking with crisis intervention specialists such as crisis hotlines and local abuse shelters
- Talking to a mental health professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or marriage and family counselor
- Consulting a legal professional to understand your rights such as an attorney or law enforcement officials

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Works Cited

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Communicating with your Partner: Suggestions

The suggestions that follow are based on the information presented in the Detailed Information document (<http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Communicating-With-Your-Partner#d#d>). They are meant to help you take what you learn and apply the information to your own needs. This information is not intended nor should it be interpreted as providing professional medical, legal and financial advice. You should consult a trained professional for more information. Please read the Additional Resources (<http://www.livestrong.org/Get-Help/Learn-About-Cancer/Cancer-Support-Topics/Emotional-Effects-of-Cancer/Communicating-With-Your-Partner#a#a>) document for links to more resources.

Understand communication patterns and behaviors in your relationship.

Before you can work on improving communication with your partner, you need to understand the patterns. Identify areas that need to be changed because of the cancer experience.

Men and women generally communicate very differently. Men may want to try to solve the problems. Women often want to talk about problems and share emotions in an effort to give and receive support.

It can be reassuring to men to know that sometimes simply sharing and discussing problems that cannot be solved is helpful to women. It may be helpful for women to be aware that discussing problems that cannot be solved can be frustrating for men.

Discuss the following questions with your partner:

- What topics do we frequently agree on?
- What topics do we frequently argue about?
- When we disagree, how do we each respond?
- Are we able to be honest with one another?
- Can we calmly discuss issues and try to resolve the disagreement?
- Do we criticize, blame, yell, walk away or give in?
- When have we handled a disagreement well?
- Can we trust one another?

It is important for survivors and partners to be aware of their own communication needs and behaviors. Both need to take responsibility for their own patterns and recognize their own role in communication challenges.

Learn and practice effective communication skills together.

- Schedule time daily to sit and talk with your partner. Make sure it is a time you both agree on and in a place where there will be no interruptions. It will most likely occur if it is a part of your daily schedules.
- Practice active listening when your partner is talking. It can be helpful to restate in your own words what your partner said. This shows that you were listening and allows your partner to correct any misunderstandings.
- It may be helpful to begin practicing your skills by discussing positive or neutral topics at first, such as those topics you frequently agree on.
- Avoid negative communication styles such as name-calling, sarcasm, yelling and criticism.
- Stay positive. Even when you are unhappy with your partner, start by mentioning something positive. Avoid blaming and name-calling.
- Use “I” language when describing your feelings and thoughts. This can prevent judgment or blaming comments that may make your partner respond defensively. Make sure that ‘I’ statements are followed by a word that describes how you are feeling.
 - Use statements such as: “I like that you included me in your decision about your new job. I felt confused and disappointed when not included in your decision to travel more frequently for work.”
 - Avoid broad statements such as, “You always seem to think only of yourself when it comes to our money.”

Take a break out if a discussion becomes heated or too filled with tension. Agree in advance about how long the break should last. Each partner may need to go to a separate area to calm down. After calming down, you can try again to return to the conversation.

- Focus on the present, and do not bring up old arguments from the past.
- Focus on the topic of discussion, and avoid bringing up other topics of disagreement.
- Recognize that you may not yet know your partner's feelings or thoughts. Let your partner know what you are feeling. Give your partner a chance to agree or disagree with what you assume is true. Listen with an open mind.

Take time to discuss difficult topics with your partner.

- Challenging topics can be discussed during regularly scheduled times together. Let your partner know ahead of time that you would like to discuss it
- Discuss one difficult topic at a time. Avoid trying to solve everything at one time—especially at first.
- Include your health care team when you discussing medical topics. Your partner may better understand your physical and emotional symptoms when they are explained by a health care provider.

Consider meeting with a licensed counselor about serious challenges in your relationship.

Sometimes communication problems are the result of more complicated problems. In some cases, a couple may require the help of a counselor or therapist.

Ask your doctor for a referral if you:

- Feel depressed, anxious, angry, disappointed, frustrated, lost
- Use physical aggression with the other or use threatening statements towards another
- Have thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else
- Have problems with alcohol or other drugs
- Think you cannot work out a solution without assistance

In many cases, serious relationship problems can be avoided or improved with the assistance of a licensed counselor or therapist.

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Communicating with your Partner: Additional Resources

The resources listed below provide more detailed information and support services to help you communicate with your partner.

LIVESTRONG Navigation Services

Online: Send email through the **LIVESTRONG** website.

Phone: 1.855.220.7777

Navigators are available for calls Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. (Central Time). Voicemail is available after hours.

LIVESTRONG offers assistance to anyone affected by cancer, including the person diagnosed, loved ones, caregivers and friends. The program provides information about fertility risks and preservation options, treatment choices, health literacy and matching to clinical trials. Emotional support services, peer-to-peer matching and assistance with financial, employment and insurance issues are also available. To provide these services, **LIVESTRONG** has partnered with several organizations including Imerman Angels, Navigate Cancer Foundation, Patient Advocate Foundation and EmergingMed.

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

www.aamft.org

Email: Send email through the website.

Phone: 1-703-838-9808

Intake Coordinator is available for calls Monday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (Central Time). Voicemail is available after hours.

The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy provides a searchable database for locating licensed marriage and family therapists. This website also has information about a variety of emotional concerns, including chronic illness, caregiving, bereavement and loss. Descriptions of related books, audio tapes and articles are also available.

American Psychological Association Help Center

www.apahelpcenter.org

Email: helping@apa.org

Phone: 1-800-964-2000

The American Psychological Association (APA) has an online help center that offers consumers free information, facts, and tips about mental health issues. The APA Help Center provides a variety of brochures and online information about a wide range of emotional concerns, including chronic illness, stress, mind-body health, resilience, and issues including managed care and health insurance. The site also includes a psychologist locator service and a toll-free number to obtain contact information about psychologists in your area. Some information is available in Spanish.

American Psychosocial Oncology Society (APOS)

www.apos-society.org

Phone: 1-866-276-7443

Voicemail is available after hours. Messages will be returned within 24 to 48 hours.

APOS works to ensure that all people with cancer have access to psychosocial services as a part of quality cancer care. They provide mental health care referrals to local counseling and support services throughout the United States. If no services are available in your community, a professionally trained Helpline staff member will provide crisis counseling over the phone. To use this service, call the toll-free number.

National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology

www.findapsychologist.org

Email: search@findapsychologist.org

Phone: 1-202-783-7663

The National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology sponsors this free psychologist referral website to promote consumer access to more than 12,000 professionally screened psychologists in the United States and Canada. This site also contains frequently asked questions about getting help, web links and resources on behavioral health care issues for consumers.

The Wellness Community

www.thewellnesscommunity.org

Email: Send email through the website

Phone: 1-888-793-9355

The Wellness Community is an international non-profit organization. It provides free support and education to people with cancer and their loved ones. Professionals lead support groups, educational workshops, nutrition and exercise programs. They help people affected by cancer regain control and reduce isolation regardless of the stage of their survivorship. Wellness Communities and satellite programs are located across the U.S. Online support groups for cancer survivors and caregivers are offered in both English and Spanish on their website.

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