Talking With Your Spouse or Partner About Cancer

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Talking about cancer is challenging because it involves intense emotions. Even couples who typically communicate well may have trouble talking about cancer. Discussing a cancer diagnosis may involve topics that couples do not want to discuss. This could include sexual problems, fertility concerns, physical limitations, financial worries, and even death.

**General communication tips**

Good communication with your spouse or partner involves talking openly and honestly about your thoughts and feelings. It includes sharing your experience, listening to your partner, and accepting your partner’s thoughts and feelings without criticism or blame. Good communication is not easy and does not 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.
* Do not 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 did not go to the doctor’s appointment with me." This 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 is 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, using a calming routine, such as taking a deep breath or leaving the room for a break, can be more helpful than forcing yourself to continue.
* Do not rush the conversation. Take time to decide what you want to say. Give your partner time as well.
* Take turns talking, and do not interrupt each other.
* Focus on a single topic at a time. Avoid bringing up other topics or old arguments.
* Do not expect to resolve difficult topics in a single 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. This person 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 both people in a relationship, and both require support. Here are some tips for talking with your spouse or partner about cancer, how it makes you feel, and how it affects you and your relationship.

* Work together to talk about and explore treatment options. While the person with cancer 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 doctor 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 do not 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 do not 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, it may be difficult to hear that your partner feels guilt or sadness.
* 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.
* Do not 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. On another day you may need some quiet time alone.

**Getting help**

If it is difficult to talk with your spouse or partner, you may consider meeting with a counselor. This person can help address communication problems and guide you through difficult conversations. Or each of you may choose to find a support group. There are support groups for people diagnosed with cancer as well as for spouses and partners. Support groups provide a setting to learn about other people’s experiences communicating about cancer within intimate relationships.