



Your Relationship with Your Spouse or Partner

For women and men in committed relationships a diagnosis of cancer can challenge even the most solid relationship. People with cancer can often feel alone or that “no one understands what I am going through” while at the same time, spouses and partners can feel helpless and unsure of what to say and do. It is important that you stay connected with your spouse or partner during this time but also normal if your relationship is feeling the stress and strain of cancer and its treatment.

Communication is the key. We often think that those who love us can anticipate our needs and wants but the reality is that both you and your partner need to share your thoughts and feelings and listen to each other. Be open and honest in communicating with your partner and ask them to do the same. Let them know if something they are doing is making you feel more isolated or adding to your stress. Do the same for them. Open communication can actually bring you closer and serve to improve and deepen your relationship. Improved communication can have a positive effect on your relationship as a whole and can also help solve many of the problems you will face as you go through your cancer journey as a couple.

Couples may experience many changes in their relationship as a result of a cancer diagnosis. Changes in roles and responsibilities such as child care, housework, paying bills, working outside the home or providing physical care can feel overwhelming and frustrating or can cause feelings of sadness and loss. These changes can also lead to a better understanding of your partner’s experience and deepen the appreciation you feel. Talking about how you are feeling will help keep you connected to your partner and ease the sense of isolation either partner can feel. Set aside a “date night” or other time just to be together as a couple perhaps to do something fun for just the two of you.

Physical closeness with your partner is another element of intimate relationships and the simple act of a touch, holding hands or a hug can create feelings of connectedness. Physical contact can help lessen your sense of isolation and improve your sense of well-being. A diagnosis of cancer as well as the physical and emotional effects of cancer treatment often affects sexuality. Problems such as concern about physical appearance, depression, fatigue, and other treatment side effects lower sex drive or make intercourse difficult or impossible. Both partners may feel anxious about their sexual relationship, but may be reluctant to talk about their feelings. Tell your partner how you are feeling and find ways to maintain intimacy through gentle touching, kissing, and physical closeness.

Above all, please know that many couples navigate cancer and its treatment well. Of course, as in any relationship during stressful times, there will be ups and downs. If you think it would be helpful to seek counseling for you and your partner, please talk with your health care provider, clergy, or oncology social worker for suggestions about finding the support that you need.