THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF A CANCER DIAGNOSIS

When you are told you have cancer, you may feel scared, uncertain, worried, or angry. You may feel numb or confused. You may have trouble listening to, understanding, or remembering what people tell you during this time. This is especially true when you first learn of the diagnosis. It is not uncommon for people to shut down mentally once they hear the word "cancer".

There is nothing fair about cancer and no one deserves to have it. Accepting the diagnosis and figuring out how cancer fits into your life is challenging. As you face and cope with the many demands of cancer, you may look more closely at your personal and family values, your religious beliefs, and what's most important in your life. This can help you figure out how you want to handle the situation.

After you are diagnosed with cancer, you may feel shock, disbelief, fear, anxiety, guilt, sadness, grief, depression, and anger. Each person may have some or all of these feelings, and each will handle them in a different way. No one way of coping is better than another.

One of your first emotions may well be shock, because no one is ever ready to hear that they have cancer. It’s normal for people with cancer to wonder why it happened to them or to think life has treated them unfairly. You may not even believe the diagnosis, especially if you don't feel sick.

You may feel afraid. Some people fear cancer itself, while others may be afraid of cancer treatments and wonder how they will get through the process. You may feel guilty. You may ask yourself if you could have noticed your symptoms earlier, or wonder what you’ve done that may have caused the cancer. You may wonder if you were exposed to something at home or work that led to cancer. Or you may worry that other members of your family will also get cancer. Some cancer is hereditary, passed from parent to child, and an appointment with a genetic counselor can help you figure this out for your family.
You may feel hopeless or sad if you see cancer and the suggested treatment plan getting in the way of leading a normal life. Just thinking about treatment and the time it will take out of your life can seem overwhelming.

You might feel angry. While some people may not outwardly express their anger and frustration, others may direct their anger toward family members, friends, or health care professionals. This is usually not done on purpose. You are probably only trying to vent your feelings, so let people know that you are not angry with them and that it is not their fault. Also let them know that you don't expect them to solve your problems -- you just want/need someone to listen.

Talking about your feelings can be helpful. Your reactions may be affected by a prior experience you, a family member or friend has had with cancer. If there is no one with whom you feel comfortable talking to or confiding in, you might want to see a mental health professional. Your feelings (mental health) deserve the same degree of care as your body (physical health).

**COPING WITH YOUR EMOTIONS**

Some people find it is easier for them to face the reality of a new or scary situation if they learn as much as they can about it. This is often true when you are dealing with a disease like cancer. Many people have a fear of the unknown and feel uncertain about what is going to happen. Knowledge can help lessen the fear of the unknown. You can learn a lot about the type of cancer you have and its treatment.

Be your own advocate. Even though people facing cancer cannot change their diagnosis, they can seek out reliable, up-to-date information and talk to family members, friends, and their health care team. Finding good sources of support can help people with cancer take control of their situation and make informed decisions.

These tips can help you make your medical appointments as useful as possible:

- Make a list of questions to ask your health care team.
- Bring a family member or friend along to appointments. They can serve as an extra pair of ears, help you remember things later, and give you support.
- Take notes. If someone uses a word you don't know, ask them to spell it and explain it.
- Ask your health care team to explain anything you don't understand.

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When you get a cancer diagnosis, it’s common to feel as if life has slipped out of your control. While you may not be able to change some aspects of what is happening, there are things that you can do to gain a greater sense of control over your situation. It’s important to work through your feelings about cancer, because how you feel can affect how you look at yourself, how you view life, and what decisions you make about treatment.

The following tips can help you deal with your emotions:

- Ask for support from family, friends, and others. Just having someone who cares and will listen to you can be very helpful. If friends or family members are not able to be supportive, find others who will. Health care professionals (such as social workers, psychologists, or other licensed health professionals) and support groups can be extra sources of support.

- Get spiritual support through prayer, meditation, or other practices that help you feel more at peace. You may want the guidance of a chaplain, pastor, rabbi, or other religious leader.

- Pay attention to your physical needs for rest, nutrition, and other selfcare measures.

- Find ways to express your feelings, such as talking or writing in a journal.

- Allow yourself private time and space.

- Walk or exercise. Be sure to talk with your cancer care team about your plans before starting a new exercise program or activity.

- Find out what helped other patients and families cope with cancer, and/or talk with other people diagnosed with the same type of cancer.

- Make changes at home to create a healthier environment, and/or talk with your doctor about making healthy lifestyle choices.

Feeling sad all the time, having trouble sleeping, or thinking about suicide are signs that you need professional help. Other symptoms that may need treatment include feelings of panic, intense anxiety, or constant crying. If you think you might need professional help, talk with your doctor.
TELLING OTHERS ABOUT YOUR DIAGNOSIS

People who have been told they have cancer may wonder when, how and who else to tell about the diagnosis. This includes family members (both adults and children), friends, and co-workers. People often feel pressured to share their diagnosis, but it is important to wait until “you are ready” to share. There is no set time when people begin to feel comfortable enough to discuss their cancer with others. It is different for each person. Some people want to talk about it right away and get support right from the start; others want to wait until they have processed the information themselves and have a handle on the situation. Sharing this experience with those close to you gives them a chance to offer their support and assistance. Your honesty and openness can help open new lines of communication and make relationships stronger and better.

Before you talk to others about your illness, think about your own feelings, your reasons for telling those people and what you expect of them. Be ready for a wide range of reactions. When you share the information with your family and friends, they will likely have many different feelings and reactions, just like you did. They may also need support at this time. They might be able to express their feelings to you, or they may try to hide them.

Each person reacts and copes differently when they learn someone they care about has been diagnosed with cancer. You may find that family members and friends are ready to talk about the cancer before you are. But no one should rush you. Simply thank them for their concern, and tell them you are not ready to talk about it yet.

TELLING CHILDREN ABOUT CANCER

It is suggested that people tell their children about a new cancer diagnosis. Talking with them about cancer is very important, for it is very likely that as you move forward with your treatment (surgery, chemotherapy or radiation) family life will change, even if you try to keep things as normal as possible. When you share the information with them, the calmer you are the less scary/upsetting the news will be.

All children, from pre-schoolers to teenagers can understand and be involved to the degree they are able, based on their age and coping skills. It is common for children to ask questions, so be prepared with clear, easy answers and explanations, even if the question is ‘Are you going to die?’.

It has been found that when families choose to hide information about a cancer diagnosis, children may still pick up on the tension and stress. As a result, they may suspect something is being hidden from them. Children may listen in on adult conversations to get information. Or they may just hear bits and pieces, or things that they were not intended to hear. They may not understand what they hear, and just know that something is wrong.

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Parents often struggle with what to tell their children when they are diagnosed with cancer. How much they need to know and can handle depends on the child's age and maturity level. Give children a small amount of information at a time, in words they can understand, and give them time to take in the information and to ask questions. Ask them if there are any words that they don't understand. Listen to their concerns and help them express their feelings. Just like adults, children will react in different ways, ways that are usual for who they are. No matter how they react, reassure them of your love and that someone will be there for them.

**THE IMPACT OF A CANCER DIAGNOSIS ON THE FAMILY**

A new cancer diagnosis can have an impact on all members of the family. Although every family copes differently, they each will go through a learning process to define the steps necessary to manage the cancer diagnosis of a loved one.

Providing direct physical care and emotional support, dealing with stress, managing finances and assuming a new role in the family can prove challenging for family members. When someone temporarily steps back (due to illness related symptoms) and another person takes on a new role, interaction within the family can change. New responsibilities may overwhelm some family members.

By talking about the issues and their feelings, members can learn to deal with changes and reach satisfactory solutions. However, some family members may not feel comfortable openly discussing their feelings. Other family members may avoid the person with cancer because they feel as if they have nothing to offer, don’t know how to act, or feel they can’t do anything to help make the situation better.

It is clear that this is not always an easy process. Some individuals and families may need assistance with these steps. There are available resources both within the hospital and in the community that can help. Individuals may find that talking with a health care professional -such as a social worker, psychologist or other licensed health professional, a spiritual religious leader or attending a support group may be very helpful.