

Care for Caregivers

One out of three people in the United States is diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime, so almost anyone can find him or herself providing care for someone—a parent, a child, a spouse, a partner, or a friend. Of all the challenges cancer brings you as a caregiver, two of the most substantial are facing the demands put on you and sorting out your feelings about what’s going on in your life.

Some days, you may feel overwhelmed, hopeless, resentful, or even angry. You can’t possibly be the superhero you seem expected to be. But on other days, you’re ready to fight for the survivor in your life; you see that you’re making progress; you remember that there’s always reason for hope.

The key is to recognize how natural all these thoughts and feelings are, including the one feeling you do not have to fear: the sense that you are failing. You’ve got the toughest job in the world—anything positive you can do is a victory.

Skills to Help You as a Caregiver

Learning how to balance the needs of the person you are caring for with your own needs takes time. To reach that goal, you’ll benefit by strengthening these basic skills:

- *Communicating.* Expressing your own needs and feelings, and being able to listen to the needs and feelings of others, is an important skill for everyone dealing with cancer. Yet many studies confirm what people often say: Communication can be difficult for cancer

survivors and their caregivers. Those who care about each other may not want to share the strong feelings that come with a diagnosis of cancer. When feelings about cancer are expressed, it gives people an opportunity to support each other, and reduce stress associated with anger or sadness. Communication does not make problems go away, but it can help you get support and understanding so you can manage cancer and its treatments more effectively.

- *Finding information.* As a caregiver for someone with cancer, you always need information—for making decisions, solving problems, and getting help. Searching for the information you need will help you better understand the disease and treatment, as well as locate resources and support.
- *Making decisions.* A diagnosis of cancer requires important decisions about treatment options and life choices. When the survivor is facing such decisions, it may be helpful for caregivers to offer assistance and perspective.

- ***Solving problems.*** You must be able to adapt to the changes brought about by cancer, and realize that you may need to accept outside help. Some places to look for assistance include your oncology nurse or social worker (if available), cancer organizations, advocacy groups, support groups of other cancer survivors, the Internet, friends, and of course, your own family.
- ***Negotiating.*** Reaching agreements that work best for everyone will make the caregiver role less stressful.
- ***Standing up for yourself and your loved one.*** Never hesitate to ask for what you need, whether it is for the cancer survivor you are caring for, or for yourself.
- Ask extended family and friends for help with activities like picking up prescriptions, grocery shopping, or taking your loved one to a doctor appointment.
- Don't cut yourself off from people and groups who can support you. For example, if you have always gone to religious services on a regular basis, continue to do so.
- Don't put your own life on hold. Keep appointments for medical and dental checkups. Eat a healthy diet, exercise, and get as much rest as you can.
- Don't feel you have to do everything yourself. While you may want and need to be the main caregiver, keep in mind that others can help, too.
- Find a strong support network. Talk to people with similar experiences or those in similar situations. It's essential to realize you are not alone.

Taking Care of Yourself

While you are building skills that will help you in the caregiver role, you also must remember your own needs, and develop the habit of taking care of yourself.

- Keep to your usual activities and routines as much as possible. This includes your work, hobbies, and exercise program, and spending time with friends.
- Take routine breaks from dwelling with the cancer crisis. Vacations, even if only for a day, can help refresh you.
- Don't assume that other people know what you think, feel, or need. Ask directly for what you need.

There's no question—being a caregiver is a hard job. There are times when you will feel burdened and exhausted. The most effective things you can do are take care of yourself and reach out to others. Don't let yourself become isolated from those who can help.

Resources

NATIONAL COALITION FOR CANCER SURVIVORSHIP

"Cancer Survival Toolbox"

www.canceradvocacy.org/toolbox

Visit the following section: *Caring for the Caregiver.*

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