

Breast Cancer: When the Woman You Love Has Breast Cancer¹

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This is the second in a 12-part series on breast cancer. To view the rest of the titles in this series, click here.

No one is ever totally prepared to hear that a woman* close to him or her has breast cancer. For the person with breast cancer, a diagnosis causes life to suddenly and dramatically change. As treatment progresses, the patient has a multitude of doctor visits, procedures, treatments, and often support groups to keep her busy and focused. Her partner's challenges also are significant, but unfortunately they often are overlooked. This fact sheet provides perspectives and suggestions for persons who are accompanying a woman through breast cancer.

Relax and Take a Deep Breath

As frightening as breast cancer is, most women survive the disease. When a lump is discovered, don't immediately fear the worst; instead, focus on what you can do to support your partner in getting through treatment. This can be a long process, so relax and pace yourself. The first series of treatments,

depending upon the type of cancer and how far it has progressed, can take four to eight months. Your support will be vital in helping your partner tolerate and recover from cancer treatment.

Do What You Do Best

There are many supportive roles that a partner can play to help a woman through breast cancer treatments. Start with those things you do best. If you enjoy cooking, prepare foods that she requests; these may or may not be her favorite foods, since treatment can affect the sense of taste. (Actually, some patients try to avoid their favorite foods so they will not be associated with cancer treatment later on.) If you are not a cook, be willing to pick up foods that she requests from take-out restaurants.

If you are an information-seeker, get on the Web, go to the library, and start researching her type of cancer, the recommended treatments, and the options. Seek out multiple sources of information to confirm the accuracy of Web-based sources. Be sure to share information with your loved one only as she

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requests it; not everyone wants to know everything about their condition.

If you can take time off from work, accompany her on doctor visits. Depending on her preference, you may be the chauffeur, or you may join her as she asks questions of the doctor. She may find it helpful if you take notes or tape-record the conversations to help both of you remember what the doctor said. There is a lot of information to absorb quickly and decisions often need to be made rapidly.

Help with Decisions

Some women are interested in taking an active role in their medical treatments and will want to gather information and make decisions. Even those who aren't as motivated to learn about their cancer, however, must make some choices. The first choice is whether to take the doctor's advice. Preparing to do so may entail seeking another opinion. Do not hesitate to seek a second or even a third medical opinion, even if the reason is just to gather more information or hear the options presented in a different way. The patient may be asked to decide on the sequence of treatments or whether to request additional tests. In the most complex cases, she may have to decide between a mastectomy and lumpectomy, or between a single and double mastectomy.

Many doctors encourage their patients to seek second and third opinions and will help set up appointments. Accept their assistance, as it will reduce the waiting time for an appointment. With breast cancer, timing is rarely critical, so the week you spend gathering additional information can be well worth it. Try to get another opinion from a doctor who is even more experienced and respected than the primary physician, or at least just as much so.

You can be an active partner in the myriad of decisions by collecting and organizing information, discussing options, and being a sounding board for her concerns. Maintain flexibility and offer options to help her see new solutions. Together you have an opportunity to shape your future together: first by stopping a life-threatening disease, second by

restoring health, and finally by learning how to live with the changes that will occur.

Shape and Sex

Society puts a lot of pressure on women to look shapely and attractive. When a woman faces the prospect of a mastectomy, she may feel that her femininity will be lost. If you are the partner of the woman with breast cancer, you can be enormously helpful by reassuring her that she is more than her breasts and that the love you feel for her can't be changed by cancer.

Many couples find that their physical relationship is constrained and changed by breast cancer. If you are in the habit of abstaining from sex while one of you has the flu or another physical ailment, then you could easily wait many months as your partner heals from chemotherapy, surgery, and radiation treatments. It is important to find comforting and comfortable things to do for each other in the meantime—a kiss, a touch, or a gentle shoulder massage may be appropriate. Discuss this aspect of your relationship openly and honestly, and experiment with new ways to express your love. This may be the best time to show your affection, but it may be a challenge to do so without discomfort.

Several of the treatments for breast cancer wreak havoc with women's hormones, push them into menopause, and launch a flurry of additional side effects, including mood changes. These changes may be temporary or permanent. There are many different treatments and techniques that can be used to minimize these symptoms, including herbal treatments, food supplements, meditation, exercise, yoga, and guided imagery. Be patient, track changes, talk to your doctor, and seek alternatives, both to relieve the symptoms and to be able to work around them.

Tips for Survival

There are a variety of specific, concrete ways a partner can be helpful through this process. You can rearrange the house to give your partner space so she can work at home more often. You can encourage her to let go of nonessential commitments and make her own health a priority. You can protect her from

well-meaning friends by screening calls if she doesn't feel like talking, and you can organize friends to show up more often if she feels alone and in need of company. You can arrange for child care on the days she can't manage. If the mailbox is bulging from long distance get-well wishes, you can find a wall or door jamb on which to display the cards—a constant reminder of the love that surrounds her. You might set up an e-mail list to make it easier for either of you to keep others informed of her progress. She probably won't want to write a letter to each person separately.

There may be a host of people who offer to help and ask that you let them know what to do. In order to avoid that situation where they all bring lasagna on the same day, you might try to orchestrate the volunteers, or have a trusted friend take care of this. Suggest the types of food they can bring, remind them of foods that are off-limits due to treatment or personal preferences, and assign them each a day.

Set up a schedule so that friends can drive your partner to appointments, drop her off at work, pick up children, or make trips to the supermarket or drug store. You also might need to ward off well-meaning friends who offer advice about which drugs severely impaired Aunt Betsy or which treatments led to complications for Grandma Ruby. Everyone reacts differently, and while these stories may be true, they offer little wisdom or assistance for others.

Cancer treatments are likely to overwhelm your lives for several months—perhaps up to a year. As you both learn about her tolerance to treatments, the limits she faces, and the speed with which she recovers, you can begin to prioritize opportunities. It may be important to take the vacation you had planned, or it may be appropriate to postpone it until you both can appreciate it. Travel for work may be more of a hassle than it is worth, or it may be helpful to keep up with the career that has shaped her life. Help her be open to change, flexible about options, and realistic about limits.

Take Care of Yourself

The stress and worry of caring for someone with cancer can take a toll on you. Just as your partner will have to learn to make choices and turn down opportunities, you also may not be able to do

everything you had planned. It may be helpful to recognize the ways your life is changing.

Some research suggests that the additional stress of being the partner of someone with cancer can significantly reduce the immune system's ability to fight infection and disease. You may be more susceptible to colds, depression, and even cancer. It is important to take care of yourself through this process, too. Connect with your friends, eat well, and save time for at least one pastime that gives you joy.

Summary

Every woman responds differently to the physical and emotional trial of breast cancer. Although there are plenty of publications that speak in generalities of what might happen, it is not possible to make firm predictions. You and your partner have an opportunity to explore this process together. Your support is an important factor in her health, happiness, and recovery. It could very well be the single most important factor in creating a restful, healing home environment and maintaining a positive outlook for a long and healthy life together.

**Since the majority of breast cancer patients are women, we refer to breast cancer patients as females. We acknowledge that about 1% of breast cancer patients are men, and that they face these as well as other challenges.*