

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coping with the News of a Cancer Diagnosis

Finding out that you or someone you love has cancer can take an emotional toll on everyone involved. Every person will handle the news differently. In fact, how you handle the situation and the feelings that arise—which can range from deep sorrow to guilt to rage—can change day by day and moment by moment. Whether you're battling cancer or supporting a recently diagnosed loved one there are ways to acknowledge what you're feeling and to get the support you need to cope.

An Emotional Rollercoaster

After hearing the words, "you have cancer," life as you know it is immediately turned upside down. You might feel your body has betrayed you or believe that the doctors have somehow got it wrong. Perhaps though, you're immobilized by the news. The range of emotions you'll go through can be as complex as the disease itself. If you've been recently diagnosed you'll likely experience some or all of these feelings at one time or another:

Shock. This is usually the first emotion you deal with after being diagnosed. Shock is often combined with denial, especially if you don't feel sick.

Fear. There are many things you may be scared of including: physical changes, uncomfortable treatment, being sick, keeping your job, maintaining your finances, dealing with your family and potentially losing the battle.

Loneliness. You may feel extremely distant from friends and family members that have never had cancer or deal with the angst of the situation by shutting you out, because they don't know how to respond or help.

Sadness. You might start to mourn the loss of your good health, independence and plans for the future.

Anger. Difficult emotions like anxiety, fear, frustration and helplessness can all be expressed as anger. Instead of dealing with these emotions, you may catch yourself taking your anger out on your health care team, family, friends or anyone close to you.

Guilt. You may be blaming yourself for your illness and causing your loved ones pain. You may also be unfairly questioning why you didn't notice symptoms earlier or what you could have done to prevent this.

All of these reactions are normal and expected. Everyone handles a cancer diagnosis differently and there's no right or wrong way to act. But, if you're finding it hard to move past a certain emotion or catch yourself bottling up difficult feelings, you should talk to a professional. A counselor or other trained professional can help you work through your feelings and provide you with strategies to better cope with this incredibly difficult situation.

Managing the Diagnosis

Despite the strong and difficult emotions you will inevitably feel after being diagnosed with cancer, there are actions you can take to better handle the news:

Get the details. Learn as much as possible about your diagnosis, treatment options, success rate, etc. Write down your questions and concerns before seeing your doctor and bring a family member or friend

to take notes. Learning more about your cancer and working with your care team to map out a treatment plan can give you some sense of control over the disease and its management.

Seek support. Despite best efforts from your friends and family, they may not be giving you the support you're looking for. It can be really helpful to reach out to cancer survivors or someone who has been recently diagnosed. They can share their experiences and give you some insight on what to expect.

Programs through a hospital, treatment centre, doctor's office or a non-profit organization can help you make connections. Online support groups can also provide you with a forum to express your fears, share information and encourage one another.

Write it down. One of the most effective ways to manage your emotions is to start writing them down in a journal. Putting your thoughts and feelings on paper can help to relieve anxiety and encourage you to express positive feelings on the days you're feeling particularly strong. That way you can refer back to your journal during darker days when you really need to harness your "inner warrior."

Let people in. Realize your diagnosis is hard on the people that love you too. Your friends and family will want to help you desperately but may not know how or when. Accept their offers to run errands, prepare meals or pick up the kids. Lean on the supportive people in your life while you try to navigate your diagnosis.

Find your "normal." Depending on how you feel, keeping up with daily activities including work, grocery shopping and laundry can help you look beyond your cancer. Even if it just means reading books, doing yoga and listening to music, staying busy will help you feel in control instead of entirely consumed by your disease.

When Cancer Hits Close to Home

A cancer diagnosis affects more than just the person with cancer. If your loved one has been diagnosed you'll also move through emotional ups and downs and may find it hard to express yourself. As a caregiver you can feel like you need to be the "strong one," and never show your own difficult emotions. After hearing that someone you love has cancer you may:

- Question why you're healthy, while they're so sick.
- Feel like you aren't doing a good job supporting your loved one and don't know how to help.
- Worry your loved one will be sick and in pain.
- Fear that you will lose your loved one.
- Have guilty thoughts about how the diagnosis will impact your own future.
- Avoid the subject altogether.
- Seem overly optimistic even if the prognosis isn't good.

Although it's an incredibly difficult time for your loved one, you have your own emotions to deal with too. Caring for someone who is sick, taking on new responsibilities and constantly worrying about the future will start to take its toll. Keep a journal, open up to friends and family, join support groups and make your own health a priority too. Try to go easy on yourself and remember: even at the best of times, no one can be the perfect caregiver, spouse, parent and/or employee.

Be the Support

One of the hardest parts of being a caregiver is figuring out how and when to help. Not every cancer patient will want the same type of assistance. Some will ask for your help and tell you directly what they need while other people will struggle to hang on to their independence. It's going to take some trial and error but don't get frustrated or stop offering a helping hand. Instead try to:

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Get the information. Just as your friend or family member needs to understand their diagnosis, so do you. Research online, go to medical appointments, ask questions, take notes and contact an organization geared to the specific cancer your loved one has.

This will help you understand the type of cancer, connect you to supports and give you guidance on how you can assist your loved one.

Listen up. Simply listening to you're loved one's fears sounds a lot easier than it actually is. You need to listen to them talk about scary or sad thoughts without "cheerleading." It's tempting to say, "you'll be fine," because, naturally, you want to help fix things. Instead, let your loved one talk about the difficult topics and just listen. Don't offer advice unless asked because you can't truly understand what your loved one is going through.

Take the cue. Look to your loved one for cues on how they'd like to be supported. If they clearly want to be left alone, give them space. If they don't seem to be responding well to visitors, gently let guests know your loved one is tired. Avoid taking things too personally. Realize that it's normal for someone with cancer to be quieter than usual, need time alone or occasionally lash out.

Have fun. Particularly after the initial diagnosis it can seem like absolutely everything is about cancer. It's healthier for everyone if you remember to do normal things like go to the movies, take walks or organize family dinners. Just by having fun together you can all get your minds off the diagnosis.

Once the initial shock of the diagnosis has settled and you have some idea of what to expect from your own or loved one's treatment, you will probably find it easier to deal with these emotions. For some people, a cancer diagnosis actually brings a new clarity, purpose and sense of hope to their life. You'll have good days and bad days but you'll start to figure out what works for you and what doesn't. Little things that comforted you before dealing with a cancer diagnosis will probably still be helpful. Turn to these comforts, be open to trying out new ways of coping and, most importantly, remember that do not have to go through this alone.