

# Social and Work Relationships

*“I think some families become stronger because of it. We’ve had our rough spots, but we have never again taken each other for granted.” —*

**DARRYL**

Having cancer can change relationships with the people in your life. It’s normal to notice changes in the way you relate to family, friends, and other people that you are around every day—and the way they relate to you.

## Your Family

When treatment ends, families are often not prepared for the fact that recovery takes time. In general, your recovery will take much longer than your treatment did. Survivors often say that they didn’t realize how much time they needed to recover. This can lead to disappointment, worry, and frustration for everyone. Families also may not realize that the way their family works may have changed permanently as a result of cancer. They may need help to deal with the changes and keep the “new” family strong.

Some survivors say they would not have been able to cope without their family members and the help they offered. And even though treatment has ended, they still receive a lot of support. For others, problems that were present before the cancer may still exist, or new ones may develop. You may receive less support from others than you had hoped.

Even though treatment has ended, you may face problems with your family. For instance, if you used to take care of the house or yard before your treatment, you may find that these jobs are still too much for you to handle. Yet family members who took over for you may want life to go back to normal and expect you to do what you used to do around the house. You may feel that you aren’t getting the support you need.

At other times, you may expect more from your family than you receive. They may disappoint you, which might make you angry or frustrated. For one woman, it was a family member’s lack of support during her treatment that upset her. “Never once, not a card, not a phone call, and I have a hard time looking at her today.”

You may still need to depend on others during this time, even though you want to get back to the role you had in your family before. At the same time, your family is still adjusting. It may be hard for you and your family to express feelings or know how to talk about your cancer.

To help your family members, you may want to share NCI's booklet for caregivers, *Facing Forward: When Someone You Love Has Completed Cancer Treatment* (see the Resources section for how to access this booklet from the NCI).

## Getting Help With Family Issues

Some family members may have trouble adjusting to changes or feel that their needs aren't being met. Your family may want to deal with issues such as these on its own, or you may want to consider getting help. Ask your doctor or social worker to refer you to a counselor or therapist. An expert on family roles and concerns after cancer treatment may be able to help your family solve its problems.

How do you cope with family issues? Here are some ideas that have helped others deal with family concerns:

- Let others know what you are able to do as you heal—and what not to expect. For example, don't feel you must keep the house or yard in perfect order because you always did in the past.
- Give yourself time. You and your family may be able to adjust over time to the changes cancer brings. Just being open with each other can help ensure that each person's needs are met.
- Help the children in your family understand that you were treated for cancer and that it may take a while for you to have the energy you used to have.

Children of cancer survivors have said that these things are important:

- Being honest with them
- Speaking as directly and openly as possible
- Allowing them to become informed about your cancer and involved in your recovery
- Spending extra time with them

With your permission, other family members should also be open with your children about your cancer and its treatment.

## Your Workplace

Research shows that cancer survivors who continue to work are as productive on the job as other workers. Most cancer survivors who are physically able to work do go back to their jobs. Returning to work can help them feel they are getting back to the life they had before being diagnosed with cancer.

Some cancer survivors change jobs after cancer treatment. If you decide to look for a new job after cancer treatment, remember that you do not need to try to do more—or settle for less—than you are able to handle. If you have a résumé, list your jobs by the skills you have or what you’ve done, rather than by jobs and dates worked. This way, you don’t highlight the time you didn’t work due to your cancer treatment.

Whether returning to their old jobs or beginning new ones, some survivors are treated unfairly when they return to the workplace. Employers and employees may have doubts about cancer survivors’ ability to work.

### Handling Problems at Work

- Decide how to handle the problem.
  - What are your rights as an employee?
  - Are you willing to take action to correct a problem?
  - Do you still want to work there? Or would you rather look for a new job?
- If necessary, ask your employer to adjust to your needs.
  - Start by talking informally to your supervisor, personnel office, employee assistance counselor, shop steward, or union representative.
  - Ask for a change that would make it easier for you to keep your job (for example, flextime, working at home, special equipment at work).
  - Document each request and its outcome for your records.
- Get help working with your employer if you need it.
  - Ask your doctor or nurse to find times for follow-up visits that don’t conflict with your other responsibilities.
  - Get your doctor to write a letter to your employer or personnel officer explaining how, if at all, your cancer may affect your work or your schedule.

**You have no legal obligation to talk about your cancer history unless your past health has a direct impact on the job you seek.**

## Friends and Coworkers

“When you say the ‘C’ word, it just turns some people right off, and they will mumble something and walk off.” —JACK

The response of friends, coworkers, or people at school after your cancer treatment may differ. Some may be a huge source of support, while others may be a source of anger or frustration. Some people mean well, but they do not know the right thing to say. Maybe they just don’t know how to offer support. Others don’t want to deal with your cancer at all.

If friends and coworkers seem unsupportive, it could be because they are anxious for you or for themselves. Your cancer experience may threaten them because it reminds them that cancer can happen to anyone. Try to understand their fears and be patient as you try to regain a good relationship.

Many survivors say that acting cheerful around others for their comfort is a strain. “I don’t want to smile any more,” one melanoma survivor said. “I don’t have the energy to be upbeat all the time.” A prostate cancer survivor noted, “You know if you complain sometimes, for some people, it turns them off. So I try not to do that.”

As survivors sort out what matters most, they may even decide to let some casual friendships go, to give more time to the meaningful ones. One brain cancer survivor found that after cancer, “You really know how many true friends you’ve got. And they don’t stop calling just because they hear you’re in remission. They really love you and think something of you.” A kidney cancer survivor found that “letting weak friendships go was hard, but I also got support I didn’t expect from people at work and in church.”

On the job or where you volunteer, some people may not understand about cancer and your ability to perform while recovering from treatment. They may think you aren’t able to work as hard as before or that your having had cancer means you are going to die soon. Sometimes, fear and lack of knowledge result in unfair treatment.

## Getting Help

If you find that a friend or coworker's feelings about cancer are hurting you, try to resolve the problem with that person face-to-face. If it is still affecting your work after that, your manager, shop steward, company medical department, employee assistance counselor, or personnel office may be able to help.

When hurtful remarks or actions get you down, talking with a friend, family member, or counselor may help you come up with ideas for handling it. But if coworker attitudes get in the way of doing your job, it is a problem that management should address.

## Relating to Others

How do you relate to other people in your life after cancer treatment?

- **Accept help.** When friends or family offer to help, say yes, and have in mind some things that they could do to make your life easier. In this way, you will get the support you need, and your loved ones will feel helpful. "When I first started treatment, I had a lot of help," said one colon cancer survivor. "So I felt bad asking my friends for more help when my treatment ended. But I still really needed it, so I let them know."
- **Address any problems that come up when you go back to work or school.** Your supervisor (or his or her supervisor), teacher, or coworkers may be able to help those around you understand how you want to be treated as a cancer survivor. If problems with others get in the way of your work or studies, you may want to talk with your bosses, your union, the company's Human Resources department, or the school's Student Affairs office.
- **Keep up contacts during your recovery.** Friends and coworkers will worry about you. If they find out about your treatment and progress, they will be less anxious and scared. Talk to them on the phone, send email, or appoint a trusted friend or family member to do this for you. When you are able, have lunch with friends or stop in for an office party. Your return to work or other activities will be easier for you and others if you stay in touch.
- **Plan what you'll say about your cancer.** There is no right way to deal with others about your illness, but you do need to think about what you'll say when you're back on the job. Some cancer survivors don't want to focus on their cancer or be linked in people's minds with the disease. Others are very open about it, speaking frankly with their boss or other workers to air concerns, correct wrong ideas, and decide how to work together. The best approach is the one that feels right to you.

# Reflection

courage doesn't always roar.  
sometimes courage is the  
quiet voice at the end of the day saying,  
"i will try again tomorrow."

—MARY ANNE RADMACHER\*

The end of treatment can be a time to look forward to the future. New rituals and new beginnings can bring a sense of relief and joy. It may also be a time of physical and emotional change.

Now that treatment is over, try to take time to get back in tune with yourself. Allow healing time for you and your family members and caregivers. Think about what you can do to begin living without cancer as a main focus.

Whether good or bad, life-changing situations often give people the chance to grow, learn, and appreciate what's important to them.

Many people with cancer describe their experience as a journey. It's not necessarily a journey they would have chosen for themselves.

But it sometimes presents the opportunity to look at things in a different way.

\* used with permission