

Cancer & Couples – Intimacy & Relationship Dynamics

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Introduction

- *“To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer in sickness and in health while we both shall live.”*
- Cancer is a couple’s disease. It affects:
 - the psychological well-being of each person
 - the dynamic relationship between partners

Requires both partners to utilize communication and coping strategies.

Partner as Primary Helper

- There are high expectations that many partners want to meet, but may not be fully capable to do so.
- The well partner is expected to:
 - offer emotional support
 - help negotiate the illness
 - adapt to the lifestyle changes brought about by the illness
 - minimize the impact of the cancer
 - be future oriented
 - and also be sensitive to the needs of the patient

The Couple Needs Support

- The well partner worries that their partner may die, wants to make the patient healthy again, and struggles to meet the emotional stress of living with uncertainty.
- The well partner needs support, but the person to whom he or she would normally turn, is often too overwhelmed by the cancer experience and has few resources to help the well partner cope.
- This can change the dynamic of the relationship:
 - The well partner cannot rely upon the sick partner for support, or at least not to the extent that he or she may have prior to the diagnosis.
 - The well partner may be forced to put his or her own shock and trauma aside in order to provide comfort, help, protection and care.

Recurrence

- The partners of patients with recurrent cancer often report more depression than at the time of initial diagnosis.
- Further, these partners experience a greater impact on their daily life as well as on their own health compared to partners of patients with newly diagnosed cancer, even though the partners are providing similar amounts of assistance.
- Couples faced with advanced cancer report more day-to-day difficulties, increased restrictions on activities, more side effects of treatments and significant worry about the future.
- There is some evidence to suggest that well male partners experience more significant depressive symptoms when their female partner has a recurrence (smaller social networks?)

Coping

- Patients and their partners have cited social support as the **number one** factor that facilitates coping.
- Also, any activities that minimize the impact of the cancer on everyday life appear to be beneficial.
- Unfortunately, some individuals use negative coping skills such as the use of escape and avoidance (characterized by sleeping more than usual, taking medications or using alcohol, or not telling your partner how and what you are feeling).

Benefit Finding?

- There is a growing body of literature, based primarily on breast cancer patients and their partners, that suggests the cancer experience can be a catalyst to positive growth.
- In formal psychological literature these changes are called “Post-traumatic Growth Experience.”
- In one study that evaluated husbands, 88% reported positive changes, including enhanced interpersonal relationships and a greater appreciation of life, following the wife’s breast cancer.
- Again, social support appears to be an important factor for both patients and partners!
 - Husbands who felt more global social support, acceptance, validation and comfort appear to be more likely to grow from the experience.

Find Meaning

- Finding meaning in the experience is an interrelated process in which the partner's growth seems to be tied to the patient's growth.
- Couples face cancer and they share the pain together, but they **also have the potential** to share in the gain from the trauma.

Problems & Solutions

- Keeping a relationship healthy through the cancer experience is no small challenge but healing an ailing relationship can be even more daunting.
- The foundation for almost all positive change is open communication and a desire to work together for positive gain.
- Cancer can actually be a stimulus for change.
- Next are some problem areas for couples dealing with the cancer experience presented with a few ideas to help facilitate coping, healing and growth.

Healing Old Wounds

- Every couple has issues that pre-existed the cancer. It is common for these pre-existing problems to surface during the stress of the cancer experience. Anticipating this may help you negotiate your way through these.
- Sometimes cancer is an opportunity to solve some of these problems. Once your initial treatment and recovery is in process the cancer can provide an opportunity to bring forgiveness to the table or to redesign your relationship in a different way.
- Couples may or may not be able to do this on their own; it can be very helpful to seek assistance from a couple's therapist. If this is not possible, take time after the initial trauma of the cancer has resolved to begin to talk about these issues.
- Be patient during the traumatic times. Try to look for the good in each other and to focus on what brought you together. Cancer is an eye opener with regard to priorities. It may provide an opportunity for each of you to let go of past grievances.
- Holding onto anger and being resentful is a very energy intensive experience. That energy could be used in other more important ways. It may be helpful to learn to manage anger and resentment by learning relaxation and meditation. Finding an individual therapist can also help to work through some pre-existing difficulties.

Believing the Cancer experience is over...too soon

- For some patients it can be very upsetting when their partner acts like cancer is in the past when it certainly does not feel that way to them.
- Fears of recurrence can be significant and may be an ongoing emotional stress. It is important to acknowledge your differences in perception and to talk about how cancer has changed each of you. It is important to make time to discuss these ideas.
- Some couples seek counseling to explore this, while others manage by communicating with each other. Sometimes patients join support groups because they provide a forum in which they can continue to process the experience yet allow the partner to spend less time focused on cancer. A couple's group or workshop may also be a good resource to help process feelings and learn better coping strategies.
- It is important for the well partner to simply understand that their partner will have an ongoing need to process the experience. Being emotionally available to talk about these concerns will be a significant support in the relationship.

Communication

- Good communication facilitates intimacy.
 - When communication breaks down problems inevitably ensue. When communication is facilitated, and individuals feel understood and supported, then problem-resolution can begin.
- During the cancer experience, communication breaks down because:
 - Of the stressors of cancer and the caretaking that is required.
 - The business of cancer is more important.
 - There is no time to share.
 - Because you're afraid of saying what is on your mind or you may try to protect your partner from your deepest feelings.
- There is an endless list of reasons why you don't talk about your feelings. Regardless of why, the result is that communication is lost.

Good Communication

- Good communication involves:
 - both talking and listening
 - understanding the other person's thoughts and feelings
 - giving space for each individual's concerns
- A seemingly simple exercise involving taking turns talking and listening can be helpful.
- This technique can facilitate understanding and may be the beginning of developing a more positive interaction between patient and partner.

Communication Exercise

- On **separate days**, each member of the dyad can take a turn being the talker or the listener.
- The talker chooses something that he or she would like the listener to understand about him or herself.
- The talker is given 15 minutes, set by a timer, to just talk about that issue or topic. The talker must refer to his or her own feelings and uses “I” statements. The idea is to communicate your own feelings in a way that will help your partner know and understand you.
- The listener actively listens. He or she does this by making eye contact, with non-verbal cues such as head nods. The listener does not speak during that 15 minute period, just listens.
- At the end, the listener takes about five minutes to summarize what the talker said and is feeling.
- The talker **does not** evaluate, respond, judge or criticize what the listener said.
- The listener tries to do the best job he or she can to really understand what the talker said.
- On another day, these roles are switched. Over time, this very basic exercise can help couples understand each other better.

Fix it? Or Understand it?

- Finding solutions is a very good skill; however, there are times when solutions may come too early in the process.
- Emotions need to be expressed and individuals need to be heard and understood.
- Expressing your emotions can help you relieve pressure and process the experience.
- Couples that are sensitive to each other's styles may find that things go more smoothly when time is given to the expression of emotions, frustrations, pain, and distress.
- After emotions are expressed, both parties may be able to engage more fully in the problem resolution phase.

Lack of Appreciation

- Feeling unappreciated can leave you feeling sad, alone, angry and ultimately resentful.
- Patients with cancer often feel that there is never enough being done to help them; the experience of cancer is so draining and overwhelming that any gestures simply feel meager.
- On the other hand, for the caregiving partner there is often a feeling that no matter how hard one tries they just cannot meet their partner's needs and they feel unappreciated.
- Separating the reality from the perception of the situation becomes complicated and feelings are often at the root.
- There are several interventions that may be helpful.

Appreciation con't

- **Identify** ways in which the other person is helping them through this process.
- Once you notice these efforts, make sure you tell the other person each time he or she does something that feels good or is helpful.
- **Reinforce** positive behaviors. Sometimes it is tempting to thank someone and then add a complaint or criticism to the end. **This will negate the recognition.** It is more helpful to reinforce the positive help with a positive statement of appreciation. If things are not exactly right, it may be better to wait until a later time to express what you really hoped for.
- Both partners (patient and caretaker) need positive feedback and support.
 - For the patient, their sense of self-esteem may be changing as a result of the losses and assaults caused by cancer and treatments. Receiving some loving feedback can feel good during these times; it helps to be acknowledged for the contributions they are able to make or that it is appreciated how hard they are working to tolerate treatment.
 - For the partner who serves as caregiver, it can make such a difference to hear that you did something right, offered some support, provided some tangible assistance and that these efforts were appreciated.

Ratio is important!

- Try to think about providing a disproportionate number of positive comments over negative ones to give your partner.
- If you think of a minimum ratio of 5 positive to 1 negative, you may help to facilitate less resentment and foster a sense of appreciation.

Appreciation Examples- Patient

- Some examples **from the patient** are:
 - I really appreciate it when you stop at the store and pick up my prescriptions on your way home from work.
 - I really appreciate it when you ask me how I feel.
 - I really appreciate it when you take me to the doctor's office.
 - I am so glad to have you sit with me while watching a video.
 - Thanks so much for getting me my water.
 - I know you are under a lot of stress, but it would mean a lot to me if you could do...

Appreciation Examples- Caregiver

- Some examples from the **caregiver** are:
 - You really are tolerating a lot from this chemotherapy. I want you to know that I really see its toll on you.
 - You work so hard at trying to eat a good meal.
 - I understand that you managed the kids all afternoon. That must have been really hard, thanks for doing that.
 - I know how scared you are through all of this. I really appreciate all the energy that you invest in getting better.
 - I know you are experiencing a lot of changes in your life right now. It is so great to see you smile at me. It reminds me of why I fell in love with you.
 - I know you want everything done just as it was, but I would like to set some priorities with you because I cannot do everything that you and I used to do and there is no clone yet.

Where's the fun?

- It is essential that some recreation and joy be built into every relationship no matter how serious the problems. I know that sounds hard. Fun needs to be planned and should be considered as important as medicine.
- There are times when everyone needs a vacation from the intensity of cancer. You may need to redefine fun into smaller shorter moments.
- Fun takes creativity and both partners must take responsibility for creating moments, hours, days or weekends. It becomes a time to reconnect and to temporarily put a moratorium on cancer's impact on your relationship.
 - A short drive with a great song on the radio?
 - A night out together?
 - Date night?
- You should use your calendars to schedule fun just as scans and doctor's appointments are put in ink. If you need help with kids, tell your support network- doctors orders!

Where's the Sexual Intimacy?

- Cancer can chase away sexual intimacy. Cancer treatments and the consequences of treatment can have a serious impact on sexual activity and may forever alter the way in which a couple engages sexually. Who you were together as a sexual dyad before the cancer is a significant predictor of the post-cancer treatment experience. There are several key issues.
- First, communication is a necessary and essential ingredient to adapt to change. Communication becomes the vehicle for understanding what has changed and how to problem-solve the changes.
- Second, sexual intimacy and sexual activities often have to be redefined. After cancer the dyad may have to change the ways that they seek pleasure, offer touch, caress, or make physical contact. Being **flexible** in your ability to define and redefine sexual intimacy is essential in the preservation of this aspect of the relationship. *“Suspend all expectations and do what’s possible in this moment!”*

Sexual Contact

- **Sexual contact is healing for many couples.** Finding ways to share pleasure, affection, physical closeness and meet each other's needs can push cancer from the forefront to the background even on a temporary basis.
- Here are a few potential resources to address the sexual needs of a couple:
 - Get reading material to assist you on sexual activity. [The American Cancer Society has a book on this topic](#). Reading a book together can be the beginning of conversations on this topic.
 - Talk to each other and share what each of you is thinking. Use the talk and listen exercise and make the topic "sexuality for me after cancer."
 - Begin slowly. Think about physical closeness, take turns touching each other and communicating about the touch (Sensate Focus).
 - Be committed to improving the sexual relationship by devoting time to this endeavor.
 - Develop new strategies for sexual contact and remember to allow room for things to be different.
 - Seek consultation from professionals. Talk to your physician or seek out a specialist in this area to help with any functional problems or worries. Talk to a psychotherapist who is knowledgeable about sexual functioning and cancer to help develop treatments. You may want to consider seeing a sex therapist.

Summary

- Cancer is a couple's disease and requires commitment on the part of patients and partners. You need to work together. Remember to have patience with yourself and with each other.
- Seek support!!