

Tip Sheet:

Facing Cancer with Your Partner

Facing cancer can be stressful for marriages and other close relationships. We offer some tips to help you and your partner cope with your cancer diagnosis and treatment.

Changes that cancer brings

- A cancer diagnosis often brings physical, emotional, spiritual, sexual, and financial changes and losses. Acknowledge these and get help when needed.
- Cancer often alters roles in relationships and families. You may have to work less or give up certain activities. Your partner may need to take on new responsibilities. These changes can lead to feelings of guilt and resentment. It's helpful to talk openly and come up with solutions together.
- You and your partner may have to re-evaluate priorities and focus on what's most important in your lives. Some plans may have to be put on hold while you set more realistic goals.
- The costs of cancer care can add financial stress. You may find it helpful to talk with a social worker, resource specialist, or financial advisor.

Communicate

Talking about cancer with your partner can be difficult, even for couples who usually communicate well. But it is important.

- **Be open and honest.** Sharing your thoughts and feelings – both positive and negative – can help you work through issues.
- **Listen in a supportive way, and don't rush.** Make sure you understand your partner's words and meaning. It's easy to misinterpret.
- **Recognize that you and your partner may have different ways of coping.** One may want to talk about feelings while the other wants to focus on concrete tasks.
- **Discuss important decisions about your treatment.** These conversations can be complicated, and you may not always agree. A social worker or other counselor may be able to help.
- **When possible, go to medical appointments together to learn about treatment options and side effects.** Many couples/families arrange conference calls if they can't be there in person.
- **Remember that cancer doesn't have to overpower your relationship.** Make room for other topics, and set aside "cancer-free" time for the two of you, even if plans are as simple as watching a movie or looking through old photos.

Accept help

- Recognize that your partner cannot meet all your needs.
- Discuss together how friends, family, and others can help you both manage. They might lend a hand with shopping and cooking, transporting children to activities, updating others on your health situation, or staying with you during long treatments.
- Talk to others about how cancer is affecting you, and make sure your partner has space to do the same. That might include friends, family members, other patients/partners in a support group, or a counselor, therapist, or chaplain.
- Express thanks to those who help out.

Sexuality and intimacy

- Cancer and its treatment often affect sexuality and intimacy. Common side effects include fatigue, nausea, depression, vaginal dryness, and problems with erections. These can reduce your sexual drive, make some activities painful, and change how you feel about your body and your partner. Many sexual issues can be treated.
- Tell your cancer care team about your sexual health concerns so they can help or refer you to a specialist.
- Talk with your partner about your feelings around physical closeness.

Fertility

- Some cancers and their treatments can affect fertility – the ability to become pregnant for women or father a biological child for men. Treatments that can affect fertility include some types of chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgery, and hormonal treatments.
- Talk with your doctor as early as possible about how your illness might affect your ability to bear children. Discuss options for preserving your fertility, such as embryo freezing or sperm banking.
- Your doctor may refer you to a fertility specialist.

Resources at Dana-Farber

Counseling

Dana-Farber clinical social workers, psychiatrists, and psychologists work with our medical providers to address the emotional and mental health needs of patients and, in some cases, family members. We provide support around anxiety, depression, sleeping difficulties, uncertainty, relationships, personal safety, and more. We can also talk with you about resources in the community to support you and your family. For more information, call **617-632-3301**.

Peer support

- Dana-Farber offers many support groups and can help find one in your community. For details, visit www.dana-farber.org/supportgroups or call **617-632-3301**.
- **One-to-One** is a free telephone-based program that connects Dana-Farber patients and families with trained volunteers who have experienced cancer. Call **617-632-4020** or visit www.dana-farber.org/onetoone.
- **SoulMates** is a program that connects new breast cancer patients with survivors who faced a similar diagnosis. Call **617-632-6501** or visit www.dana-farber.org/soulmates.

Sexual health and fertility

Dana-Farber's Sexual Health program offers counseling and education to help patients and their partners address issues around sexuality, intimacy, and fertility. Call **617-632-4523**, email sexualhealthprogram@dfci.harvard.edu, or visit www.dana-farber.org/sexualhealth.

Family Connections

The Family Connections program supports families when a parent has cancer. Call **617-632-2605**, email family_connections@dfci.harvard.edu, or visit www.dana-farber.org/familyconnections.



Financial concerns

Dana-Farber social workers and resource specialists work with patients who are having trouble managing expenses; call **617-632-3301**. Our financial counselors help with health insurance concerns; call **617-632-3455 (select option 1)** or visit www.dana-farber.org/financial.

Spiritual care

Chaplains from many faiths provide spiritual guidance and counseling. Our chapel, located on the second floor of the Yawkey Center, is also open for reflection and prayer. Call **617-632-5778**, email DFCISpiritualCare@dfci.harvard.edu, or visit www.dana-farber.org/spirituality.

For more information

To access the internet during your visits to Dana-Farber, consider using one of the free computer workstations in the Blum Patient and Family Resource Center, or borrow an iPad from the Shapiro Center for Patients and Families. Both centers are on the first floor of the Yawkey Center.

This document is for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.