

# New Connections

HELPING YOU FIND YOUR WAY THROUGH TREATMENT



Issue 17

**For couples  
coping  
with cancer,  
someone *has*  
written the book.**



Individuals, most certainly, will respond to events and situations differently. Couples will too, however, it's been observed that many couples respond to cancer in similar ways. Their responses are quantifiable. That's what led to the writing of *Couples Confronting Cancer*, which has been written for all kinds of couples: those who have been together a long time, those who have recently started a relationship, and those who are married or not married, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

Some of the exercises in the Couples' Corner Workbook are designed to improve communication. Some are designed to help with specific tasks, for example, the division of chores. Some are created to ease discussion of particularly difficult topics, such as sexuality or death. These exercises, especially, may bring up intense or upsetting feelings, which we believe are normal and healthy during an illness and should be given expression. If these feelings get in the way of coping, however, then we recommend professional help.

This workbook may be useful immediately after diagnosis, during treatment, and after treatment is completed. Below is an example of one of the exercises. This one may seem awkward and simplistic at first; however, it is the most important of all the exercises. With practice, it will become clear how critically important it is.

## Learning to Listen

The goal of this exercise is to help couples communicate more clearly and more respectfully. Both partners take turns being the "speaker" and the "listener."

As the speaker you will learn to use "I" statements, as well as to simplify and clarify your statements, so that your partner can hear the full message behind the words you are saying.

As the listener, you will practice carefully attending to your partner's words and taking steps to make sure that you understand the message clearly.

### STEP ONE

**Speaker:** *Begin by communicating a very simple message.* Communicate simply and clearly. Only communicate one "chunk" of information, rather than two or three messages that are linked together. Begin your sentences with "I" rather than "You."

**Example:** "I'm feeling really sick today, and I would appreciate it if you would pick up take-out food for yourself and the kids."

### STEP TWO

**Listener:** *Repeat what you heard your partner say.*

Rephrase the message until you get it exactly right. After you repeat what you have heard, ask your partner if you fully understood. This is not the time to respond to the message. You will have a turn to respond to the message. Part of your job is to refrain from responding defensively, disagreeing, or arguing with your partner. Don't forget to ask your partner if you heard the message correctly.

**Example:** "You said that you want me to get take-out food because you are too sick to cook. Is that right?"

### STEP THREE

**Speaker:** *Make sure your partner understood your message correctly and fully.*

If not, clarify the message. Do not add any more information until your partner has fully understood the meaning of the first "chunk."

**Example:** "Right, but it's not just that I don't feel like cooking, I don't even want to smell food cooking. I'm just too sick."

### STEP FOUR

**Listener:** *Again, repeat what you have heard.*

Expand on any part that is unclear, but not yet adding any information or responding in any way.

**Example:** "So you don't want any cooking in the house. You want me to pick up some food for me and the kids."

**Speaker:** "Yes, that's right."

### STEP FIVE

*Now trade places—switch roles.*

This is the point when the listener has a chance to respond to the message. It is now the speaker's turn to listen and not react.

**New Speaker Example:** "I know you want me to go out, but I'm too worn out. I'd prefer to make sandwiches or something that wouldn't smell the house but wouldn't require me to go out again."

**New Listener Example:** "You are tired and would prefer to stay in and make something easy. Is that right?"

**New Speaker Example:** "Yes, but I am willing to make something that you won't have to smell, if that is helpful."

**New Listener Example:** "You would prefer not to go out because you are really tired, but you are willing to prepare something that I won't have to smell. Thank you."

Take turns as speaker and listener, communicating simple messages until the technique feels natural.

This is just one of many helpful exercises contained in the Couples' Corner Workbook portion of *Couples Confronting Cancer*. To order your copy of the book, [click here](#).

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