

New Connections

HELPING YOU FIND YOUR WAY THROUGH TREATMENT



Issue 22

How to tell others about your diagnosis



As much as you may want to avoid the subject or keep it a secret from others, it is usually best to be honest about your cancer. Keeping it a secret can lead to more stress at an already stressful time. It can also keep you from getting support from others – support you will surely welcome. Still, the decision to discuss your diagnosis, when and with whom, is yours alone.

In the beginning, you may find that you only want to tell your spouse or partner and one or two friends or family members. In addition, those who knew you were having a scan, biopsy, or some other test will likely ask about the results so you may want to include them in the group you tell first. Over time, you can increase the circle of friends and loved ones you tell about your cancer.

Break the news on your terms and your schedule

Give yourself time to make your own adjustment to the diagnosis. Even though cancer is no longer a death sentence, it is a serious diagnosis. You may need some time to lament, to think about next steps, and to determine just how much information you wish to share.

Manage your expectations.

When you are ready to tell others about your diagnosis, it may help to think about your reasons for telling a particular person and what response you expect from him or her. Sometimes, when people are emotionally fragile, they may expect something more than that other person is able to give. For example, a friend or loved one who is normally a stoic person may not become suddenly emotional with your news. That doesn't mean the person is not sad or concerned; it's just representative of that individual's personality. If you go into a situation expecting a different response from someone's personality, you may be setting yourself up for disappointment.

Conversely, after sizing up your situation on your own, you may be feeling very hopeful, yet the person you are sharing your news with may seem scared and depressed. You may want the person to share your hopefulness and positive attitude, but he or she just "isn't there" yet. After all, remember that each person responds differently to stressful situations. If you have not anticipated the possibility of such a reaction, it can be upsetting.

Sometimes people may even react in odd and hurtful ways because of their own fear, awkwardness, and discomfort. For example, someone may begin to tell you a sad and discouraging story of another cancer patient who died—this is the last thing you want or need to hear! Sometimes people are just talking because they feel the need to respond, but they don't know what to say. You can help them by telling them that you only need them to listen to you and you don't need them to say anything other than that they care and are there for you.

Use language that matches your feelings

Some people prefer to take ownership of their cancer with statements like "I have cancer." Others are more comfortable putting it at a distance and using language like "I was diagnosed with cancer." It seems like a small difference between the

two phrases, but it may be a big one to you. Since there is no “right” way of speaking about the disease, choose the language that works best for you.

Be prepared for questions

Most people will be curious about the next step: Will you be having surgery? Where and when? Will you be having radiation or chemotherapy? When and for how long?

Answer their questions as well as you can. This exchange may help you, too. As you hear yourself talking about your treatment plans, it reaffirms that you have a plan, which can help you feel more in control.

If you really do not yet know what the next steps are, an acceptable answer is “I just don’t know yet.” Even though friends and loved ones are well intentioned, don’t let them push you into thinking about something on which you’re not yet ready to focus.

Help people help you

Your friends and loved ones will want to help you in any way they can. “How can I help you?” may well be their first question. Since they cannot possibly know exactly what you need it’s a good idea to think through what you may need in the next few weeks and months and be ready with some suggestions for people. You might ask them to do things like drive you to and from the doctor, do your grocery shopping, take your children to school or sports activities, or pet-sit for you.

Once you and your friends and loved ones have had time to adjust to the news of your diagnosis, you’ll likely find that you will want to share more information with them – about how your treatment, your needs, and your feelings. It is usually less stressful to express thoughts and emotions than hide them, and sharing can be helpful for both you and those close to you.

**For more cancer information, call 1-800-ACS-2345
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National Home Office, 250 Williams Street, Atlanta, Georgia 30303-1002