

Coping With a Cancer Diagnosis

Coping with breast cancer

A breast cancer diagnosis can cause a wide range of emotions, from denial to guilt, helplessness, anxiety and fear. It is a stressful time. That is why it helps to build a strong support network of family and friends and to make time to share your feelings with others.

Co-survivors are family, friends, health care providers or colleagues who are there to lend support from diagnosis through treatment and beyond. Support from your co-survivors can help you through this difficult time.

Make time to share your feelings with others. They can be there to listen to your concerns, share their experiences and help you make decisions regarding your treatment. They can also help you gather information about breast cancer and even share some of your day-to-day tasks. Many people also find strength in their spirituality and faith.

A social worker or counselor can also help. They can teach you ways to manage your issues with breast cancer and how to cope with your feelings.

Finally, talking to your doctor is one of the most important things you can do. Taking time to talk honestly with your doctor will help you gain trust and confidence. It will also help you work together as a team to make important treatment decisions.



Feel like you are losing control?

When told you have breast cancer, you may feel like you have lost control of your life. You might also be overwhelmed by all the decisions you have to make. These feelings are normal, but do not let them keep you from taking action. First, learn about breast cancer at your own pace. Get information about clinical trials, treatment options and side effects. Remember, doctors can make recommendations, but decisions must be made by you and your doctor together.

Knowing what to expect is another way to feel in control. It may also help to keep as normal a routine as possible. However, be patient. Coping with breast cancer requires expression of emotion, a fighting spirit and support.

The positive side

Having breast cancer may feel like the worst thing that has ever happened to you. But there may be some positive things you can take away from the experience. Many say that surviving breast cancer has given them a renewed appreciation for life and for their social support network. Others have made new friendships, rekindled old ones and found an inner strength that they did not know they had. This has led many people to become involved in helping others cope with breast cancer. If you are interested, you can help to educate and support others affected by breast cancer. Contact an organization such as Susan G. Komen for the Cure® or your local hospital to see how you can get involved.

Handling treatment

The goal of any treatment for breast cancer is to offer the best possible chance of recovery.

But even the best treatments have side effects. Some of the more common ones include fatigue, hair loss and short-term limited arm movement. Although each person experiences side effects a little differently, changes in physical appearance often lead to a change in body image. This can lead to stress and anxiety. Having a mastectomy can be difficult too, but there are options such as reconstructive surgery and prostheses designed to help restore body image.

The Reach to Recovery program sponsored by the American Cancer Society provides support for breast cancer patients directly from other breast cancer survivors. The Look Good...Feel Better® program helps people undergoing radiation or chemotherapy by providing beauty tips and supplies to enhance appearance and self-image during treatment.

During treatment, you may need help with everyday errands or household chores. Do not be afraid to ask for help. Ask for help with grocery shopping and child care. You may also need someone to drive you to your doctors' appointments. Being clear about what you need will greatly increase the chances you will get the help you need.

Resources

Organizations

Susan G. Komen for the Cure® — for information and support, call the Komen breast care helpline (English and Spanish).
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org

American Cancer Society — for information about the Reach to Recovery and Look Good...Feel Better® programs.
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

CancerCare® — provides free support services for anyone affected by cancer.
1-800-813-HOPE
www.cancercare.org

Pamphlets

What's Happening to Me? Coping and Living with Breast Cancer by Susan G. Komen for the Cure®. 2010.
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.ShopKomen.com

Questions to Ask the Doctor by Susan G. Komen for the Cure®. 2009.
1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)
www.komen.org/questions

Related fact sheets in this series:

- Breast Health Resources
- Chemotherapy and Side Effects
- Getting the Support You Need
- Radiation Therapy and Side Effects
- Talking with Your Doctor