

# What's Happening to the One I Love?



*Helping couples cope with breast cancer*



When someone you love has breast cancer, she or he may face physical and emotional struggles. It is important that you do all you can to support them. It is important that you do all you can to contribute to their emotional healing. You will need each other during this difficult time.

This booklet provides information on how you can better understand what they may be going through and what may be needed from you. It provides you with some ideas on how you can help. It also explores ways you can learn to cope with your own feelings.



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## What your partner may be feeling

A breast cancer diagnosis can cause sudden and intense emotions. These feelings can include fear, anger, frustration, depression or helplessness. These emotions are normal. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel. Women may fear losing their feminine image. Men may be embarrassed to have a “woman’s cancer.” It is important that you understand what they may be thinking and feeling.

Allow them to share their feelings with you openly and honestly. Pay attention to their needs. Listen to what they are saying and asking. If you share your own thoughts and feelings, they may realize that it is okay for them to do the same.

### Where do you begin? Try asking...

*“How do you feel about what the doctor said? Are you concerned? Let’s sit down and talk about it. I’d really like to know what you’re feeling.”*



*“I really want to understand. I’m ready to listen when you want to talk.”*

*“How can I help? What can I do to make this better or easier for you?”*

*“Is there someone else you’d like to talk with about your feelings? Would you like me to call them?”*

## How your partner copes

As your partner is faced with breast cancer, they may seek information, try to find answers and plan for the future. They may also ask for help from others, vent their feelings, avoid talking about it or even deny a problem exists. All of these responses are normal, but some ways of coping may be more helpful than others.



Here are some signs that your partner is coping:

- Getting information and asking questions
- Accepting that she/he has breast cancer
- Staying positive
- Maintaining self-confidence

If you fear that they are not coping well, try talking about your concerns. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. Support groups and one-on-one counseling may help.

**One-on-one counseling** — Licensed psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, social workers or clergy are trained in the area of cancer or chronic illness. They can help with coping and treat or reduce anxiety or depression. The doctor, oncology nurse or social worker can provide a list of trained cancer counselors.



## How you can help:

### Provide practical support

One way you can help your partner cope is to provide practical help. If physically able, it is important for them to continue their daily routine and participate in usual activities. But there will be times when they need help with housework, paying the bills or driving the kids to school. You can help by doing some of these daily tasks. Work as a team. Here are some ways that you can help:



- Cook dinner and wash the dishes, or order carry-out food more often.
- If you have children, help more if you can.
- Drive to doctor visits and to support group meetings.
- Create a weekly housecleaning schedule and have them check it to make sure nothing is missed.
- Offer to manage and pay the bills.
- Hire a housekeeper if you can.
- Screen telephone calls and visitors.
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## Provide emotional support

Your partner needs your support now more than ever before. There are many ways family and friends can help. You are in a unique position to help. There are four very important things you can do to provide emotional support:

### 1. Spend time together.

Make time to be with each other and provide your undivided attention.

### 2. Ask about needs and wants.

Ask them to be truthful in telling you what they want from you and what they do not want.



### 3. Listen.

Listen without judging or trying to come up with answers or solutions.

### 4. Reassure.

Reassure them of your continued love. Tell them now and always that you love them.



## Provide empathy

Think about how you would feel if you had breast cancer. How would you react? What would you do?

Empathy is sincerely trying to feel their emotions. You cannot know exactly what they are going through. But you can tell them that you are trying to understand what they are feeling. It may not always be easy for them to express their thoughts and feelings. Pay attention to what they are saying, and what they are not saying. Ask questions and let them know you are there to listen when they are ready to talk.



## Provide acceptance and assurance

A breast cancer diagnosis can have an impact on self-image. By telling your partner that you love them for who they are — not for what they do or how they look — can help confirm their identity. Write down your answers to these questions:

- What are the qualities in them you love and admire?

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- How are you physically attracted to them?

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- How have they helped you get through tough times in the past?

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- What does your relationship mean to you?

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- How do you see them as a friend to others?

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Consider sharing your answers to these questions. You can help remind them that they are not a “breast cancer patient” but an individual, a friend, a member of a family, a member of a community and your partner in life.

## Allow your partner to be herself or himself

It is important to allow your partner to express their feelings. Outbursts of tears and anger are ways they can vent frustrations about what they are going through. Remember that these reactions are not directed at you, but at the situation. Fatigue, depression and mood swings may be a result of issues related to diagnosis or treatment. Showing that you love and accept them no matter what will help them feel comfortable sharing their feelings.

- Allow them to say what is on their mind.
- Allow them to be angry.
- Let them know that when they are with you, it is okay for them to cry, be sad or even be silent.
- Ask if they would like to be alone, to talk or to be held.



## Gather information

Seeking information is an important part of coping. By gathering information, you can help make informed decisions. You can help your partner regain some control of their situation. Read the information you get, so you too can understand the topics that may arise. You may not be able to provide all the answers, but you can help find them. How?

- Help make a list of questions to ask the doctor.
- Plan to go to doctor appointments and help voice concerns and questions.
- Help find information about your partner's diagnosis and treatment options.
- Visit a cancer information center to gather pamphlets related to breast cancer treatment and support.
- Help find a doctor for a second opinion by asking friends, or by contacting physician referral services at local hospitals that specialize in breast cancer or women's health.
- When ready, help find a support group by asking the oncology nurse, social worker or doctor. Local hospitals, physician offices or the local branch of the American Cancer Society (1-800-ACS-2345) can make referrals.
- Be careful not to overwhelm your partner with too much information. Let them decide what they want to read and when.

## Your relationship

Each of you is coping in your own way, but you must come together to support each other. When serious illness occurs, roles in a relationship can change. For example, you may need to take on some new tasks like cleaning the house, doing yard work or cooking dinner. These new roles may feel strange in the beginning.

Illness can bring the two of you closer together, but it can also make any problems in your relationship more clear. By communicating openly, you can help your relationship survive this stressful time.

### Communication tips:

- Spend time together away from the TV, computer, newspaper and telephone.
- Tell each other how you feel.
- Ask questions — you cannot read each other's mind.
- To be sure you understand, recite back to them what was said using your own words. Ask if you are correct in your understanding.
- Write each other letters.
- Don't be afraid to say the word "cancer."
- Do not be afraid of silence.
- Use non-verbal communication — a tender touch, a hug or holding a hand can sometimes say even more than words.





## Sexual intimacy

Being diagnosed and treated for breast cancer may change your partner's feelings about sex. The physical and emotional side effects from treatment can change the way they view their body image. This may cause a lack of interest in sex. For some women, chemotherapy can even start early menopause. Depression and mood swings can also occur. Together, talk with their doctor about these changes.

Restoring a sexual relationship may not be easy and may take time. Be patient and kind. Talk with each other about your needs and expectations. Let them know that you are still attracted to them. Continue to give compliments. Even if they are not interested in sex at this time, they may want and need intimacy. A man may also face similar feelings about sex if he is being treated for breast cancer. Talking to a health care provider about these issues may help.

- Make an effort to create a safe place for each other.
- Sit together and hold hands.
- Take walks together.
- Make plans for a getaway weekend.
- Go out on dates and schedule romantic evenings at home.



## Your needs

In the same way your partner is afraid, angry or frustrated, you too may be going through similar emotions. You may feel that you need to be “strong,” or hide your feelings so as not to upset your partner. You may feel a need to “fix their cancer.” When you find that you cannot, you may feel helpless or overwhelmed. There is no right or wrong way to feel. It is important that you not overlook your own needs during this difficult time. Think about the things you can control. What can you do to help yourself? Check the items here that you think might help you cope, then act on them:

- Get information
- Talk with others
- Release your emotions by exercising, playing sports, working around the house or even crying
- Escape by reading books, listening to music, watching movies or spending time with friends
- Seek counseling
- Make plans for the future
- Write down your thoughts
- Pray
- Other ideas \_\_\_\_\_  
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## Tend to your family needs

### Children

If you have children, they will need special attention at this time. Each child will have specific needs. Children of different ages have different thoughts, views and concerns. For example, young children may be afraid of being left alone, while teenage daughters may be worried about getting breast cancer themselves. Being honest with them is important. Keep them informed. Letting them know in advance about what to expect after treatment can often help to calm their fears. For more information on talking with your children about breast cancer, read the booklet in this series titled *What's Happening to Mom? Talking to your children about breast cancer*.

### Friends and family

Friends and family members may also feel anxious, scared and helpless. They will have questions and concerns too. It may be your job to keep them informed while keeping privacy at the same time. Ask your partner how much information they want to share with friends and family. Respect their wishes and act as a resource. Give family and friends the right amount of information. For more information, the booklet titled *What's Happening to the One We Love? Helping co-survivors cope with breast cancer* may be helpful.

## Ask for help

Do not be afraid to reach out to others for support. Sometimes all it takes is asking. You can continue to be supportive if you take care of your own needs. If not, you run the risk of becoming worn out or resentful. You may be so busy caring for your partner's needs that you neglect your own needs.

### Ask yourself these questions:

- Do I need more support from others?
- Do I need someone to listen to me?
- Do I need other family members to help care for my partner?
- Do I need to set aside some time for myself?

Finding someone outside of your family to talk with about your thoughts and feelings may help. Use this space to list the names and phone numbers of the people you can turn to.

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Phone number</i>
<i>Counselor</i>	_____	_____
<i>Friend(s)</i>	_____	_____
<i>Clergy</i>	_____	_____
<i>Social worker</i>	_____	_____
<i>Support group</i>	_____	_____

## A final thought

You may not be able to do everything. Just by caring enough to read this booklet you are making a difference.

Although your future may hold some painful times, sharing in your partner's fight for recovery provides a way for you both to strengthen your relationship and get through this together.

You can help.

## Resources

**Susan G. Komen®** offers a breast care helpline service to those in need of breast health and breast cancer information and support. Se habla español. TDD available.

Phone: 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)

Hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET / 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. PT.

[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**Susan G. Komen® Message Boards** offer online forums for breast cancer survivors and co-survivors to share their experiences and advice with others affected by breast cancer.

[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**American Cancer Society** has a national network of employees and volunteers who implement research, education and patient service programs to help cancer patients and their families cope with cancer. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-ACS-2345

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

**Cancer Information Service**, a part of the National Cancer Institute, has information specialists that are available to help answer your cancer-related questions whether you are a patient, family member or friend, health care provider, or researcher. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-4-CANCER

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

**CancerCare** offers free counseling and emotional support, information about cancer and treatments, financial assistance, educational seminars and referral to other support services. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-813 HOPE

[www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org)

**Mautner Project, The National Lesbian Health Organization**, is committed to improving the health of women who partner with women including lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals, through direct and support service, education and advocacy.

Phone: 1-866-MAUTNER (1-866-628-8637)

[www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject](http://www.whitman-walker.org/mautnerproject)

**The Cancer Support Community** is a cancer support organization devoted solely to providing free psychological and emotional support to cancer patients and their families.

Phone: 1-888-793-WELL

[www.cancersupportcommunity.org](http://www.cancersupportcommunity.org)

This list of resources is made available solely as a suggested resource. Please note that it is not a complete listing of materials or information available on breast health and breast cancer. This information is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Further, Susan G. Komen® does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referred to in this list.

**Notes:**



1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)  
[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**Other booklets in this series:**

- What's Happening to the One We Love?  
*Helping co-survivors cope with breast cancer*
- What's Happening to Me?  
*Coping and living with breast cancer*
- What's Happening to Mom?  
*Talking to your children about breast cancer*

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