

Tips for men when caring for a woman with cancer

▲ **The world of cancer is a strange, confusing and scary place.** And if you're a man caring for a woman with cancer, everything can seem foreign and unfamiliar as you frantically try to grapple with issues and emotions that may feel overwhelming. The "newness" of it all can make it difficult to know your role.

The good news? The majority of the time, just being there for her is enough. But through a few simple actions, you'll be able to show her the kind of support she needs so you can both face this new world together.

SUPPORT HER DECISIONS

She's no medical expert. Neither are you. But together you'll make lots of decisions – with the help of your health care team, of course – and your job is to help her decide and then support her decision. Choosing a mastectomy, for example, comes not only with medical considerations but also emotional ones. Will you still find her attractive? How will she feel about herself? She's worried about these things, so reassure her that your feelings will not change. That way she can stay focused on what's best for her health.

NOTHING'S TABOO

You may already have great communication with your partner, but for many men, talking about breasts or anything gynecological might seem a little strange. Now is not the time to get shy. She is likely terrified about how her body might appear after surgery, how that will affect her sexuality, and how you will react. She will need comfort and assurance from you – probably many times throughout the process – to help her focus on healing.

GET ORGANIZED

When your loved one is dealing with doctor appointments, side effects, and hefty bills, it can get a little chaotic. Step up and help keep her organized: Start a filing system for appointment notes, medical research, and insurance claims. Take care of sending updates to family and friends so she doesn't have to



tell the same story 10 times. Keep the calendar up-to-date of all of her appointments and treatments, and be the buffer between her and that well-intentioned but nosy friend.

BE A FIERCE ADVOCATE

Make no mistake: Caregiving is an exhausting job. She'll likely be even more exhausted, though, which means it falls to you to be the backup. Go with her to every appointment (if you're able), and don't let the doctor leave the room until you've gotten answers to every question. Don't let a nurse dismiss a side effect or concern. While cancer terms are familiar to health care professionals, they're Greek to nearly everyone else. Ask them to explain anything you don't understand, and be assertive. The better your knowledge of what she's going through, the more effective you'll be as a caregiver.

ELIMINATE UNNECESSARY STRESS

For many women, the thought of some unchecked item on the "to do" list can add a nagging stress to an already full brain. Anticipate those daily chores that give her anxiety – maybe the dishes, the yard, dog hair on the carpet, you know the ones – and either take care of them yourself or enlist family and friends to help out. Crossing those items off the list without her having to think about them can have a cumulative positive effect on her outlook.

COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

For many men, sharing feelings isn't their strong point. There are times in life when you need to be the strong, silent type. This

is not that time. She needs to hear your feelings about this entire experience – good and bad – so she can feel like the two of you are going through it as a team. Conversely, when she needs to share with you, listen. Listen without judging. Even if there's nothing you can do to fix the particular situation, just keep listening. You'll be surprised how much you can empower her with simple communication.

ESCAPE NOW AND THEN

Men often have an innate need to provide, but men are also human. If you start to forget your own basic needs, you're no good as a caregiver. Plan time for yourself on a regular basis: Meet a friend for lunch, play some basketball, watch a movie. It's not selfish, it's completely necessary. You'll return to your duties as caregiver mentally and physically refreshed, ready to help once again.

SUPPORT YOURSELF

Many caregivers have to suspend their own lives, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation. And about one-third say they have some strain or stress on their social and physical well-being, including anxiety, depression, spiritual challenges and sleep problems. Although the caregiver's depression can be at almost the same level as the patient's, many men don't realize they need support, too. Don't overlook the support groups and educational programs offered by many cancer centers and through Web resources. Talking with other men – either in person or online – can give you the support you need. ■