FRANKLY SPEAKING ABOUT CANCER
A PROGRAM OF THE CANCER SUPPORT COMMUNITY

10 TIPS FOR NAVIGATING RELATIONSHIPS AND COMMUNICATION AS A CAREGIVER

Being a caregiver is more than just helping with daily tasks. It often means adapting to new responsibilities and navigating changes in your relationship with the person you're caring for, especially after a cancer diagnosis. These shifts can be challenging but learning how to manage them can help reduce stress and strengthen connection with your loved one.

This resource is designed to help caregivers, like you, stay connected to themselves, their loved ones, and their support systems. Below, you will find 10 practical tips to help you adapt to relationship changes and express your needs with greater confidence. No matter where you are in your caregiver experience, we hope these tips will offer support and encouragement every step of the way.

For more resources and support for caregivers, visit **www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers**.

1 RECOGNIZE THAT ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND RELATIONSHIPS MAY CHANGE

When a friend, partner, spouse, or family member is diagnosed with cancer, you may find yourself stepping into a caregiving role. This can lead to changes in your relationship dynamic. For example, when caring for a parent with cancer, it may feel like you have switched roles. You may need to start making decisions or considering choices you have never faced before.

It is normal to experience a mix of emotions during these changes, including sadness, frustration, or uncertainty. These feelings are valid, and it is OK to take things one step at a time. Having open and honest conversations about how your roles and responsibilities are changing can help you both feel more connected and understood. As your everyday starts to look different, be gentle with yourself and your loved one as you both adjust.

Cancer Support Helpline® — If you need help finding resources or want help getting information about cancer, call Cancer Support Community's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline® at 888-793-9355. It is staffed by community navigators and resource specialists who can assist you Monday - Thursday 11:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. ET and Friday 11:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. ET.

2 COMMUNICATE OPENLY, HONESTLY, AND RESPECTFULLY

Sometimes changes brought on by a cancer diagnosis can bring new worries, stress, or even disagreements. That is why it is important to communicate in an open and respectful way. Check-in regularly with your loved one about how you both are feeling. Use "I" statements to describe your thoughts, feelings, and worries. An example is "I am concerned." This can help you say what is on your mind without sounding like you are blaming the other person. It is just as important to listen carefully to try to understand how they feel too. Try using open-ended questions to help gain more understanding. For example, try asking "What are you worried about?" instead of "Are you worried?" Instead of deciding what your loved one needs, ask questions like, "Would you like me to sit with you?" or "Would you prefer some quiet time?" This respects their feelings and preferences.

Every relationship is different. Some people may find it easier to disagree or talk about hard topics than others. If you or your loved one are having trouble talking about a topic, it might help to have a trusted person guide the conversation, while not picking sides.

MYLIFELINE®

Caregiving can be meaningful and fulfilling, but it can be challenging too. It is important to find support and connection. Join CSC's private, online community to exchange stories and ideas with other caregivers and gain hope and support throughout this experience. Sign up today at **www.MyLifeLine.org**.

3 PRACTICE SHARED DECISION-MAKING

As a caregiver, you might need to help your loved one make important decisions. You may even be asked to make decisions for them. You might make decisions about their cancer treatment and care or more personal matters. This may include making decisions about their finances or housing.

Making some of these decisions may be challenging and bring up a lot of emotions. This may be the first time you learn details about your loved one's medical or financial history. This may also be the first time you have to think about their physical and mental health needs. There may be times when you disagree with one another. Even if you want the best for them, your thoughts and ideas may be different from their personal goals and values. Always remember that ultimately the patient's decisions, especially regarding treatment, should be respected. You need to support whatever they decide even if you may not fully agree. To help with this, try working together as a team. Look up information and talk openly about different options with your loved one.

Remember, you are not alone. If you need support, know that there are professionals who can help. Talk with a social worker, patient navigator, licensed therapist, or faith leader. Attending support groups is a great way to feel connected to others having a similar experience. Their role is to help you both through the treatment and decision-making processes. They can get you connected to the right care and resources at the right time.

4 ADVOCATE FOR YOURSELF AND THE PERSON YOU CARE FOR

Before going to an appointment, it can be helpful to make a "game plan" with the person you care for. Talk about any questions or concerns you both have and decide who will bring up which topics. This will help you feel more confident and be on the same page.

Respect your loved one's comfort level when sharing information with the care team. There may be some topics that they want to talk with their doctor about in private. Talking about these things ahead of time can help you be ready to support your loved one and be that extra voice and advocate if needed.

Throughout treatment planning, remember that your loved one's voice and wishes should be at the center of each decision. Work with the care team to make decisions that balance the goals of treatment with your loved one's preferences and values. Let the doctor know of any questions or concerns you may have as well. If you feel that you and your loved one's needs or concerns are not being heard, a patient navigator can help. They can work with you directly or connect you both to a social worker to advocate on your behalf.

Sometimes it can feel like the doctor or other care team member is not listening or is making decisions without your input or even disregarding your questions or concerns. Always remember that you are the patient's advocate and the patient should always understand and approve any treatment decisions. Do not be afraid to speak up and ask for clarification or even to refuse a treatment or treatment plan if it is something the patient does not want. Making sure the patient's decisions are respected and followed is part of your role as their advocate.



5 CLEARLY COMMUNICATE WITH OTHERS

Boundaries are personal limits we set to protect our time, energy, and emotional well-being. They can help set clear expectations for others. Boundaries can help you feel safe and empowered.

Setting boundaries lets you be clear about the kind of support you can give to others. It also allows you to be clear about when you need support or a break. They are an important part of having healthy, balanced relationships. Boundaries can even help prevent burnout.

When you set a boundary, talk kindly and honestly about your limits. Talk with your loved one about what each of you may need and what is realistic. Talk about what you might expect from the other person. It is OK to say "no" if you are feeling overwhelmed or if an ask feels too much. You may need to say things like, "I want to help, but I need a break right now. Let's find someone else who can help with this."

Friends and family may mean well, but you may sometimes feel overloaded with questions or advice. Having a gentle script can help, such as "I'll share updates once a week, so everyone is in the loop."

Being honest and saying "no" while still showing support allows you to take care of yourself and your loved one. Talking clearly about your needs can also help reduce confusion and hurt feelings later on.

6 TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

At times, caregivers may find that they put their own needs aside as they care for someone else. You might not even notice it happening. As you try to support another person, be sure to also think about how to best support your own needs.

Keep up with your own medical appointments and any important screenings or checkups. Let your doctor know if there are any changes to your physical or mental health. Let your doctor know about your caregiving role so they are informed and can watch for issues that may arise in your health due to stress. Do your best to also get enough sleep and eat regularly. Try to stay physically active – even a short walk outside each day can help you feel less stressed.

Make time for things that bring you joy or help you to relax. Whether it is reading, drawing, gardening, or listening to music, small moments of peace can recharge you. Stay connected to people you trust and feel comfortable with. Talking with a therapist or others going through a similar situation can offer relief, support, and encouragement. It can be helpful to communicate and share with other caregivers with similar experiences. Consider joining a local cancer caregiver support group.

For more resources about coping with mental health concerns, visit **www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Coping-Mental-Health-Concerns.**

7 BALANCE CAREGIVING WITH OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES AND FAMILY NEEDS

Caregiving often comes alongside other important roles in life. You may be a spouse or have your own children to take care of. You may be dating or navigating new friendships. You may be navigating school, your career, and professional relationships. You may also be navigating your own health concerns while caring for someone else. It can feel like a lot to handle all at once.

That is why it is important to think about what you need and what matters most. Try to find ways to balance caregiving with your other responsibilities. This might mean caregiving for only a portion of the day, sharing responsibilities with others, or taking intentional breaks to care for yourself. Some days it may feel like it is selfish to take time and care for yourself. That is not the case! In fact, it helps you be a stronger support for those around you.

Try not to be too self-critical. Do not expect that you will do everything perfectly or get things right on the first try. It is OK to ask for and accept help when you need it – from friends, family, or other professionals. When you have helpful information, people to guide you, and a good support network, things can feel a little easier and under control.





8

SUPPORTING INTIMACY AND MAINTAINING CONNECTION

When someone you love has cancer, your relationship with your partner or other family and friends may feel different. You may find that you have less time or energy to connect with others, and that is OK. Even as things change, it is still possible to maintain closeness and feel connected to the people you care about.

Talk openly with your partner, children, or friends about how you are feeling. Honest conversations can help you stay emotionally connected, even if you are physically or mentally exhausted. Remember that the small moments matter. Even for a short amount of time, the moments where you can come together to share a laugh, hug, or just talk can help you feel connected.

Intimacy might look a bit different in romantic relationships. If your partner is undergoing treatment and you cannot be physically intimate, there are still other ways to connect and show love. You can write sweet notes, share memories, or listen to music together. Kind words, gentle touch, or just sitting quietly together can still emphasize intimacy. Holding hands or simply saying "I'm here with you" can help you feel close. Finding new ways to stay emotionally and physically connected can remind both you and your loved one that your bond is still strong, even through the changes.

Make space for normalcy by talking about things beyond cancer such as sports, family memories, TV shows, or upcoming plans. These conversations help preserve your relationship and remind you both that you are more than just a caregiver and patient. This balance supports emotional well-being and deepens your connection.

9 ASK FOR & ACCEPT HELP WHEN NEEDED

In this role, you may have a lot to manage. There is only one of you, and you cannot do everything yourself. It is OK to ask for and let others help where they can. Accepting your limitations does not mean you are letting other people down. In fact, it allows others to step in and support you both.

Make a list of things you are OK letting go of, and have others help with those. You can ask friends or family to help with chores, errands, or meals. You might also reach out to local groups or hire a professional to help with cleaning or lawn care. This gives you more energy to focus on what is important. You and your loved one will benefit in many ways from having others help where needed.

Stay connected with the people you trust and care about and talk to them about how you are doing. If you are feeling anxious, depressed, or overwhelmed, it is OK to talk to a counselor or therapist. They can help you find new ways to adjust and cope with the changes that come with caregiving. **Seeking support for your mental health is a courageous step.**

10 REMEMBER WHAT MATTERS MOST

Being a caregiver is an important and meaningful role. While it can feel good to help someone you love, it can often be stressful and time-consuming. Try to stay connected on what matters most to you, whether that is time with your loved one, shared moments of joy, or personal values that guide you. Simple reminders can help you stay grounded. This may be adding a sticky note to your mirror with an encouraging message or a phrase you come back to when things feel overwhelming. These small gestures can offer encouragement and help you stay centered.

Be patient and gentle with yourself and your loved ones during this time. Make space for the parts of life that bring you happiness outside of caregiving. When you can, share openly about your needs and hopes. Honest communication can strengthen your connection with others and make it easier for everyone to feel supported along the way.

RESOURCES

CAREGIVER RESOURCES

Cancer Support Community
888-793-9355
www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers

National Alliance for Caregiving
202-918-1013
www.Caregiving.org

This Is Living With Cancer
www.ThisIsLivingWithCancer.com

MyHealthcareFinances
www.MyHealthcareFinances.com

Caregiver Action Network
855-227-3640
www.CaregiverAction.org

Family Caregiver Alliance
800-445-8106
www.Caregiver.org

National Cancer Institute
800-422-6237
www.Cancer.gov

Cancer Support Community Resources

Cancer Support Helpline® — Have questions, concerns or looking for resources? Call CSC's toll-free Cancer Support Helpline (888-793- 9355), available in 200 languages Mon-Thurs 11am-8pm ET and Fri 11am-6pm ET.

Open to Options® — Preparing for your next appointment? Our trained specialists can help you create a list of questions to share with your doctor. Make an appointment by calling 888-793-9355 or by contacting your local CSC or Gilda's Club.

Frankly Speaking about Cancer® — Trusted information for cancer patients and their loved ones is available through publications, online, and in-person programs. To order printed copies of this publication and others, visit **Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org**

Services at Local CSCs and Gilda's Clubs — With the help of over 200 locations, in 50 markets, CSC and Gilda's Club centers provide services free of charge to people impacted by cancer. Attend support groups, educational sessions, wellness programs, and more at a location near you. **www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Find-Location-Near-You**

Cancer Experience Registry® — Help others by sharing your cancer patient or cancer caregiver experience via survey at **www.CancerExperienceRegistry.org**

MyLifeLine® — CSC's online community welcomes anyone impacted by cancer to easily connect with others. Create a personal network site and invite friends & family to follow your journey. Participate in our discussion forums to meet others who understand what you are experiencing. Join now at **www.MyLifeLine.org**.

Grassroots Network — Share your voice with federal and state policy makers on issues affecting cancer patients and survivors. Join our Grassroots Network at **www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Become-Advocate**.

This publication is available to download and print yourself at **www.CancerSupportCommunity.org/Caregivers**.
For print copies of this publication or other information about coping with cancer, visit **Orders.CancerSupportCommunity.org.**

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