

A traumatic event is one that is life threatening, unimaginable, and unexpected. One that can assault your body, your spirit, and your life as you know it. For a couple, a cancer diagnosis is a traumatic event for *both* partners. But when you each recognize your strength as a couple, you have a physical and psychological advantage in this journey.

Diagnosis One of the first challenges you will face is the diagnosis itself. For the person diagnosed, the news may feel like a threat to your sense of self. It's psychologically jolting to go from being a mother, soccer coach, or retired golfer to a person with cancer in the time it takes to hear three words: "You have cancer."

For the partner, you also take on a new definition of self – you are now a caregiver who often feels helpless and wonders, "What can I do to make it better?"

For both of you, there are often feelings of shame, blame, or guilt for what you feel you could have or should have done. These feelings are normal, but the reality is that no one can control all aspects of life. Use your energy to look *forward* together, not backward.

Initial Reactions As with any life-altering event, you may both experience anxiety; difficulty sleeping, eating,

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relaxing, and concentrating; intrusive thoughts, dreams, or worries; and avoidance or numbness. It is very helpful for one partner to be a compassionate presence to the one experiencing distress, whether that means listening in the middle of the night, taking a walk, or cooking together. In most cases, these reactions subside within a few weeks, particularly as the treatment plan becomes clearer.

Communication Partners are often afraid of upsetting one another, so they hide what they are feeling and thinking. However, it is better to communicate openly. Try asking your partner, "Can I share some of what I am feeling?" Or say, "I wanted to tell you what I was worrying about. Is that OK?" People are



TACKLING THE CHALLENGES OF A CANCER DIAGNOSIS AS A COUPLE

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often relieved to be able to share their feelings with their partner. Expressing appreciation of each other's courage and help is important.

It is also a good idea to talk together about when and how you will tell your children, family, friends, and coworkers

double your reserves and expand your support.

Cancer does not define you or your life as a couple. You need to help each



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other hold on to the things that define you, be it the love of pets, travel, or sharing funny stories.

Perhaps the best thing a couple can do as they cope with a cancer diagnosis is take turns

holding on to hope. Being together as you face the unknown can reduce your fear and strengthen your bond.

about the diagnosis. Overall, people rarely regret telling others about their cancer, but it can be very burdensome to give constant updates. Designating one person to keep everyone else updated will help you maintain connections.

Treatment Having two sets of ears listening during medical appointments is always better than one. Partners have that advantage.

Stress Reduction Cancer seems to freeze time and can absorb all of your attention, making it difficult to focus on anything else. It is crucial, however, for partners to give each other permission to return to their individual stress reducers and networks of support – her friends, his golf, her piano, his therapist. These resources

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