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, 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 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.

**Partners are often afraid of upsetting one another, so they hide what they are feeling and thinking. However, it is better to communicate openly.**

**Tackling the Challenges of a Cancer Diagnosis as a Couple**

by Suzanne B. Phillips, PsyD, ABPP, CGP, FAGPA

Cancer does not define you or your life as a couple. You need to help each 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 to take turns holding on to hope. Being together as you face the unknown can reduce your fear and strengthen your bond.

Dr. Suzanne Phillips is a licensed psychologist, psychoanalyst, diplomat in group psychology, certified group therapist, and Fellow of the American Group Psychotherapy Association. She has a private practice in Northport, NY, and she is an adjunct full professor of Clinical Psychology at the CW Post Campus of Long Island University, NY, and a postdoctoral faculty member of the Derner Institute of Adelphi University. She is the author of three books, most recently coauthored Healing Together: A Couple’s Guide to Coping with Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress. Learn more at CouplesAfterTrauma.com.