



# WELLNESS

## Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

June 2010

### This Month's Topic:

### **Strength for the Journey**

**Helping a Loved One Cope with Cancer and Other Serious Illnesses**

"It's cancer." Hearing a loved one speak these words can take your breath away. Your second reaction will most likely be, "How can I help?" Here's what you can do to be a helpful member of your loved one's care team.

### Practical Ways to Help

Many times the person who has been diagnosed with cancer or another serious illness feels overwhelmed. They may be recovering from surgery or reacting to treatment such as chemotherapy, and they don't know how to ask for help. Here are some ways you can get started:

- Create a calendar to track medical appointments, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, physical therapy, etc. You can use a large desktop calendar, or set one up online through Web sites like [lotsahelpinghands.com](http://lotsahelpinghands.com).
- Drive the patient to and from medical appointments.
- Act as a secretary for your loved one: bring a tape recorder and a notepad to record the details of medical appointments.
- Organize meal delivery, light housework, gardening, and babysitting as needed.
- Encourage as much self-care as possible.
- Remember being helpful doesn't mean you have to do it all. You can quickly experience caregiver burnout. Call on the patient's community: friends, family, colleagues from work, church or synagogue members, and neighbors are usually happy to pitch in. The patient's health care provider can also suggest resources.

### Be There in Times of Stress

If you know the person is going to a medical appointment, you might call a few hours later to ask how it went and give your loved one a chance to talk.

Perhaps your loved one is afraid of certain treatments. For example, many people do not like having a computed axial tomography (CT) scan or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) procedure, or dislike going for daily radiation treatments. You could offer to come along. Then make sure to follow through with your plan.

Encourage your loved one to take advantage of support systems offered through his or her health care provider: counseling, social work, yoga or meditation groups and support groups can help your loved one cope.

## **What to Say When You Don't Know What to Say**

People communicate in many ways. Some people need privacy. Others need to vent. The best way to help is to be direct: ask if your loved one wants to talk. If they begin talking about their illness and feelings, don't change the subject. Be patient and listen.

Reinforce trust. Make sure your loved one knows that you will protect his or her privacy.

If you feel awkward talking about your loved one's illness, break the ice by writing a note. You could say, "I've been thinking about you and wonder how you're doing," and suggest a get-together. Plan a lunch date or a stroll in the park.

On the other hand, conversations about things other than the illness can be healing. Let your loved one take the lead. Sometimes a simple hug is enough. Remember that silence is all right too.

## **Watch for Depression**

If your loved one begins acting differently — angry, irritable, or sad — these are all normal reactions to a serious illness. Be sure to tell them, "I care about you. It's OK to tell me how you feel." But if they become extremely sad or withdrawn, the American Cancer Society advises speaking with their cancer care team about whether your loved one is becoming depressed.<sup>1</sup>

## **It's Normal to Worry**

It's perfectly normal to feel worried and uncomfortable when a friend or relative has cancer or another serious illness. But don't let your feelings change the way you relate to your loved one. Remember, they are the same person they were before the diagnosis.

Your loved one needs extra support, especially during medical treatment and hospitalization. You can play a role in keeping life as normal as possible by being available and being yourself. Just do what you normally do, and treat your loved one as you always have.

Keep looking for hope. Cancer — like other major illnesses — can be frightening, but it is not necessarily fatal. Many people are treated successfully, and many live a long time after being diagnosed. Try to focus on living. When you stay positive, you encourage your loved one to do the same.

## **Resources:**

### **Employee Assistance Program (EAP): United Behavioral Health (UBH)**

Toll-free number: 1-866-248-4105 (7 days/24 hours), Access code: 61570,  
[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)

Visit the “Living with Chronic Conditions” Life Stages Center for educational articles on dealing with the stress of cancer and other chronic illnesses.

*The information and therapeutic approaches in this article are provided for educational purposes only and are not meant to be used in place of professional clinical consultations for individual health needs. Certain treatments may not be covered in some benefit plans. Check your health plan regarding your coverage of services. UBH does not endorse any particular third-party Web site but simply offers examples of some of the more common sites available.*

<sup>1</sup> American Cancer Society. Caregiving: How to Care for a Loved One With Cancer—and Yourself. Available at [http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MLT/content/MLT\\_3\\_1x\\_Caregiving\\_--\\_How\\_to\\_Care\\_for\\_a\\_Loved\\_One\\_With\\_Cancer\\_-\\_And\\_Yourself.asp](http://www.cancer.org/docroot/MLT/content/MLT_3_1x_Caregiving_--_How_to_Care_for_a_Loved_One_With_Cancer_-_And_Yourself.asp).