Article Series Talking About Cancer All

You have cancer. Your loved ones have questions.

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All Talking About Cancer

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Discussing your cancer with loved ones can often be difficult. From diagnosis through treatment and beyond, how you feel about your cancer will probably shift. Some days, you may feel hopeful; other days, you may feel angry, sad or afraid. That's why it's important to get in touch with your own emotions before you have conversations about your cancer with your loved ones.

Whether you're breaking the news about your diagnosis or explaining the details of your treatment, you get to decide whom you want to tell and which details you want to share.

When loved ones want to help

After you tell the people in your life that you have cancer, one of the first questions they may ask is "How can I help?" If you're still processing the news of your diagnosis, that might be a difficult question to answer. If you're having trouble answering this question, you might find "How to ask for help—and accept it" useful. And you might also want to direct your loved ones to the article "What to ask instead of 'How can I help?'," which may give them some ideas about how to support you.

What's most important is that you and your loved ones communicate openly and honestly about your needs. Telling your loved ones what you need—or don't need—will help them be more supportive during this time. As much as you can, try to be flexible and encourage your loved ones to do the same.

When people say too much

Friends, family, coworkers and acquaintances may have very different reactions when you tell them you have cancer. Some people won't know exactly what to say. Some may choose their words carefully. But others may say too much or ask questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

Although it's important to try to be open about how you're feeling about your cancer and to encourage those closest to you to do the same, it's just as important to set some boundaries.

As you tell people about your diagnosis, you may find yourself answering the same questions over and over. People may ask about the type of cancer you have, any treatments you might undergo or your outlook. They might even ask about other personal details that you may not be willing to share. They may also express their own fears and anxieties about your cancer, which could be difficult for you to hear.

Having these kinds of conversations can be very tiring. You may even feel as though you keep having to relive the moment you were diagnosed. If your loved ones only want to talk about your illness, you may feel that they look at you differently now

than they did before you had cancer.

> **"I didn't want to be defined by my illness."**

Judi, an artist and spoken-word poet with stage 4 thyroid cancer, knows this struggle all too well. “I didn't want to be defined by my illness,” she says. Because of this, she avoided talking about her cancer for three years.

Eventually, Judi felt a yearning to share her story after keeping it to herself for so long. She realized her story was powerful, and by telling it, she could help others who were going through something similar. She found a way to be open while still maintaining a level of privacy that felt right for her.

Finding that balance can be tricky because it depends on your relationship with each individual person. But there are some strategies you can use, whether you're talking with your closest friends, family, acquaintances or near strangers. Rather than shutting down a conversation completely, try gently changing the subject.

To steer the conversation in another direction, you can say:

- "I appreciate your concern, but can we talk about something else?"
- "I don’t feel comfortable sharing that with you. Let’s talk about something else."
- "Enough about cancer! How are *you* doing?"

By setting boundaries, you can be honest about your needs while still keeping the lines of communication open.

You might also try using a free app, **LivingWith™**, designed to help manage life with cancer. On the app, you can build a circle of support and share health updates with your friends and family. You can choose which people you want to keep in the loop so you can communicate with them as often as you want—without feeling the need to repeat the same things over and over.

Download **LivingWith** today

When people make hurtful comments

"Sometimes, well-meaning people say insensitive things," Judi says. "They don't understand that what they're saying is painful to the person who’s ill," she says.

"I've been told that I should be grateful that I have a slow-growing cancer. I'm sorry—nobody who has cancer needs to be grateful for that diagnosis. I've had people talk about their uncle, or their dog walker or their grandfather who had a similar illness, and then I feel like I have to feel sorry for *them* and comfort them. And sometimes I just don't have the energy for that. It's a difficult thing. Often people are just trying to connect with you and sympathize with you. But those kinds of comments have the opposite effect for me."

> **"Sometimes, well-meaning people say insensitive things. They don't understand that what they're saying is painful to the person who's ill."**

If you're not sure how to deal with these kinds of comments, take some time to figure out which topics are "hot button" issues for you. For example, you may feel irritated when people question the choices you're making about your treatment. Maybe you hate it when people say "Don't feel sad!" or "Cheer up!" Or you may feel frustrated and angry when someone brings up religion or suggests that you've done something to "cause" your cancer.

You might find it helpful to jot down a few ways you could respond to the comments that bother you. Simply changing the subject might be easiest. Or perhaps you want to tell people more directly why their comments are hurtful to you. If you let them know how something made you feel, they may try not to say things like that again in the future.

You might say:

- "I know you're just trying to help, but when you say _____, that makes me feel _____."
- "Telling me not to be sad doesn't really make me feel better. I just need someone to listen right now."
- "I'm so sorry to hear that. But I hope you can understand why I might not be able to talk about this right now."

Try practicing your responses with a close friend so you can get comfortable changing the subject or explaining why you are hurt by certain comments. That way, you'll be ready the next time these topics come up.

Surround yourself with people you can rely on

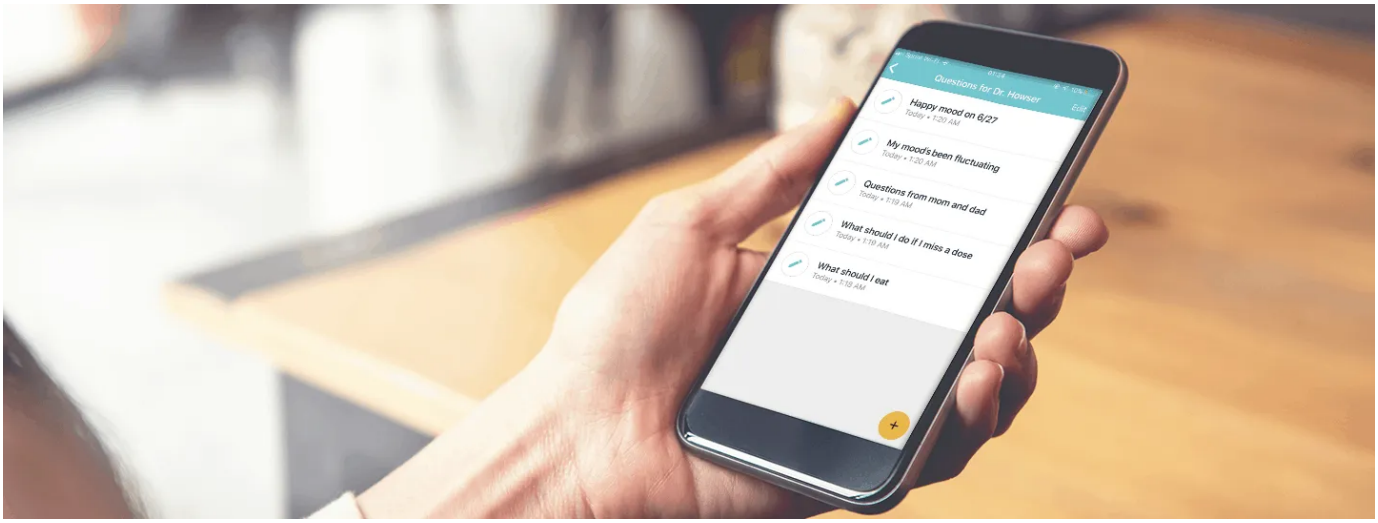
If someone you love says something that hurts you, you may want to let them know, even if that conversation is uncomfortable. If you don't, you might find yourself resenting that person. Remember that sometimes when loved ones say things that don't sit right with you, it's not because they're trying to hurt you. It's often because they're trying to show that they care.

"It’s important to identify the people who are truly there for you."

Barbara, who has lived with many different kinds of cancer throughout her life, learned this crucial lesson: It's important to identify the people who are truly there for you. She took stock of the people she could rely on during this challenging time, and she chose to surround herself with those people.

Cancer may not be easy for you or your friends and family to talk about. If your loved ones upset you, try to view it as an opportunity to help them communicate in a way that makes you feel more supported. But if they continue saying hurtful things, you may need to distance yourself from them and instead spend more time with the people in your life who are truly caring and empathetic.

Above all, try to be as open and honest as you can be with your loved ones, and don’t be afraid to let them know what you need.



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