

CANCER and DIVORCE

Managing the dual challenges of cancer and the end of a relationship By Nancy Christie

A cancer diagnosis brings physical and emotional challenges, requiring both excellent medical care and a strong personal support system. When a couple chooses to divorce or separate during this time, managing the personal loss can present another hurdle. As difficult as this can be, there are strategies that can help you cope.

Why Now?

It can be tempting to blame a separation or divorce on cancer, but most experts agree that it is far more likely that the stressors related to the disease simply highlight weak areas that already exist within a relationship.

The intensity of emotional and physical stress during this time magnifies patterns of behavior within relationships, as couples confront changing roles and responsibilities. The caregiver may need to step up to take over tasks that the patient previously handled, which can be a difficult transition; both partners will need to learn to manage and express feelings of fear, resentment, anger, anxiety and grief that arise; and financial stressors may develop, especially if the patient is unable to work or if outside help must be brought in to handle household or child-care tasks. How a couple relates and supports one another—or does not—as they navigate these various factors will have an impact on their relationship.



According to Peter Edelstein, MD, FACS, FASCRS, author of *Own Your Cancer: A Take-Charge Guide for the Recently Diagnosed and Those Who Love Them* (Lyons Press, 2014), “Healthy marriages are rarely permanently destabilized by a cancer diagnosis, although they may go through several rough patches. In the end, solid marriages may even be further strengthened by the true partnering of spouses in together facing the threat that the cancer poses to their relationship.”

While some troubled marriages improve, with cancer refocusing the partners on what is truly important in life, says Dr. Edelstein, “in other teetering marriages, a cancer diagnosis represents the final blow, leading to separation, as this additional set of fears and issues simply overwhelms one or both partners.”

In some cases, couples may make it through the treatment phase together but find that the survivorship phase presents an entirely new type of stress that highlights underlying problems in the relationship. “The spouse who had cancer often cannot ‘snap back’ to pre-cancer mode,” says Lidia Schapira, MD, Medical Oncologist and Associate Editor at Cancer.Net. “She or he may still be dealing with lingering physical or emotional effects and may, in some ways, not be exactly the ‘same person’ as before, and the healthy spouse often has a hard time understanding and accepting this.” The result, Dr. Schapira says, can be a decision to separate. “I’ve seen cancer survivors find the courage to leave an unhappy marriage after cancer and others who have been left by their spouse after enduring the illness. Sometimes



TAKING A PROACTIVE APPROACH

Given the many stressors related to a cancer diagnosis, it is not surprising that problems can arise, affecting the stability of a relationship. The following recommendations provide helpful insight into ensuring that relationships remain strong in the face of these challenges:

- **Keep the lines of communication open and draw on past experience.**

“Anytime there is a crisis, you need to increase communication, with the goal of mutual understanding, not necessarily an agreement. It may hurt to share feelings, but unshared feelings are what really diminishes relationships,” says Mike Uhl, MA, MDiv, LMFT, Mind-Body Therapist at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Newnan, Georgia. Uhl tells couples to “fight the cancer, not each other.” And while the unique challenges that arise for couples in the wake of a diagnosis are no doubt significant, Uhl encourages partners to remember how they have united to overcome other difficult situations and to employ those same strategies now. “I recommend that they try to reuse those skills and remind themselves of those things that helped keep them from falling apart in the past,” he says.

- **Shore up your support network.** Even if your partner is willing to do it all, bringing friends and other family members on board can provide a much-needed break from caregiving responsibilities. This not only will help keep a sense of balance in your partner’s life but also will give him or her a chance to process all the feelings the cancer diagnosis has generated.

- **Talk with a therapist with a background in cancer.** Discussing all the emotions—fear, anger or grief—either together or separately not only gets them out in the open but also can provide useful coping tools. Working with a counselor experienced in the specific challenges faced by cancer patients, says Dr. Fleishman, will ensure that treatment-related symptoms are not mistakenly attributed to psychological or emotional causes.



it comes as a surprise, but more often it reflects longstanding problems in the marriage.”

For some survivors, a cancer diagnosis inspires the desire to make healthier choices in their lives, and that may include ending an unhealthy relationship. Mike Uhl, MA, MDiv, LMFT, Mind-Body Therapist at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Newnan, Georgia, says that issues that arise in a relationship during cancer can make patients aware of problems and inspire them to make changes. “They may recognize, *Now I have a different direction in life*, but the other person isn’t really interested in this new direction,” Uhl says. “Like any other crisis, if one person feels like he or she has developed or changed, and the other person hasn’t grown, they can grow apart. This distance can be bridged if the couple makes a commitment to work together to repair the distance issue and re-establish closeness.”

Although cancer itself is the most logical culprit, some patients may also blame a divorce or separation on themselves,

rationalizing that if they had not gotten ill, the marriage would not have ended. But Uhl encourages patients to remember that no one chooses cancer; the choice, he says, comes in how each person reacts to the diagnosis, treatment and changes that occur—which can ultimately determine the outcome of the relationship.

Moving Forward

Whatever the underlying causes of a divorce or separation, employing strategies to cope with the new reality and ensure your own well-being is essential. Toby Dauber, LCSW, works with patients who are coping with chronic illness; she counsels patients to examine their feelings and then embrace those aspects of life that bring joy and inspire gratitude. “Usually, when we’re down our thoughts are much more dire and catastrophic,” she says. “You have to challenge those thoughts: Can you imagine a time when you are going to feel better? What are you grateful for? Who is in your life? Remember what makes you happy, joyful and positive. You don’t have to stay stuck in this place.” Instead, she says, work to gain perspective and to recognize that “this is what was happening in this situation, this is how you feel and this is how you can feel.”

Focusing on the future during the treatment phase will also benefit you physically, says Stewart Fleishman, MD, a Fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine and the American Cancer Society and author of *Learn to Live Through Cancer* (Demos Health, 2011). “The latest research shows that focusing on recovery during treatment, rather than waiting until treatment is over, can shorten the recovery process,” Dr. Fleishman says.

While it is true that the time frame for recovery—physical, emotional and spiritual—varies depending on the type and the stage of cancer and the treatment received, letting negative emotions about the end of the relationship take precedence is not going to help your healing process. And if you are not able to move forward on your own, says Dauber, it is time to reach out for professional help: “Sometimes it takes some supportive therapy before patients are able to realize that their life doesn’t have to stay in this place, and they can reflect back and look at the changes and become stronger.”

Seek Support

If you are facing a separation or divorce, your personal network can be invaluable; family members, friends, your faith community or even work colleagues can provide social support and practical help. “A trusted family member can look at the situation a little more dispassionately and make sure that legal or financial matters are protected by enlisting help from attorneys or financial planners. Social workers can help access community resources or entitlement programs,” says Dr. Fleishman.

A cancer support group or individual therapy can also help you cope—not just as a person with cancer but also as a person without a partner. Look for services or groups that can tailor support to your situation and provide insight. Imerman Angels, a nationwide support network offering one-on-one support, for example, not only matches patients with “Mentor Angels” according to age, gender and cancer diagnosis but also, when possible, to marital status.

“The end of any marriage can be

frightening, depressing and challenging for the former partners. The addition of a cancer diagnosis, which comes with its own fears, threats, issues and concerns, dramatically compounds the enormous challenges that result from separation or divorce,” says Dr. Edelstein. “For the cancer patient whose spouse has left, the attention, involvement and support of loving family and friends can play an important and significant role in cancer care and quality of life—providing for the patient’s physical, emotional, medical and practical needs.”

He adds, “While no one claims that the intermittent assistance and support of family and friends is a true replacement for the constant presence of a dedicated spouse, the deep involvement of loved ones is invaluable to the single cancer patient.”

A New Normal

As you adjust to the many changes that can arise as a result of a cancer diagnosis, you will no doubt be experiencing a “new normal.” Coping with the end of a relationship at this time will add another dimension to the changed landscape of your life. While these changes can present challenges, know that with support you can navigate this period and move ahead to embrace a full life. **CFThrive**

REACH OUT FOR RESOURCES

Support groups and individual therapy can provide great benefit if you are experiencing challenges in your relationship, as can print and online information and support available through the following organizations:

- **American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy**

A professional association for the field of marriage and family therapy, this organization provides TherapistLocator.net, a website offering information about problems facing today’s families and links to qualified family therapists in the local community.

aamft.org

703-838-9808

- **American Cancer Society**

This nationwide, community-based voluntary health organization is dedicated to eliminating cancer as a major health problem, offering a wide range of support services.

cancer.org

800-227-2345

- **American Psychosocial Oncology Society**

The APOS Toll-Free Helpline is a national resource to help people with cancer and their caregivers find counseling services in their own communities.

apos-society.org

866-APOS-4-HELP (866-276-7443)

- **CancerCare**

This nonprofit organization provides professional services to help people manage the emotional and financial challenges of cancer, with free telephone, online and in-person counseling and support groups, resource referrals, publications, education and financial and co-payment assistance.

cancercare.org

800-813-HOPE (800-813-4673)

- **Imerman Angels**

This free service, available worldwide, partners cancer fighters, survivors and caregivers with “Mentor Angels” of the same age and gender who have had the same type of cancer.

imermanangels.org

877-274-5529

- **National Cancer Institute**

The National Cancer Institute coordinates the National Cancer Program, which conducts and supports research, training, health information dissemination and other programs with respect to the cause, diagnosis, prevention and treatment of cancer, rehabilitation from cancer and the continuing care of cancer patients and the families of cancer patients.

Coping with Cancer

cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping

800-4-CANCER (800-422-6237)

- **Stupid Cancer**

This nonprofit organization empowers young adults affected by cancer through innovative and award-winning programs and services.

stupidcancer.org