

Many people are fortunate to have companionship for the journey beyond a cancer diagnosis. Of course, like any long trip, tensions may arise for those on the journey through illness. The following are some tips for couples taking this trek together.

For Survivors Remember that the person supporting you loves you.

For Caregivers As a survivor once said, “If you don’t got it, you don’t get it.” Saying “I understand,” usually isn’t really true when speaking to a survivor. Just be with the survivor you love when he or she needs you.

Survivors undergoing treatment may experience kindness like soothing medicine, and unkindness like salt in

How to Listen With Your Heart and Question With Love

Step 1: Just be present and have an open mind.

Step 2: Use “w” and “h” questions: who, what, where, when and how.

Step 3: Look for patterns in the answers and share those, if it helps.

Step 4: If necessary, forget steps 1-3 and simply practice the powerful art of silence.

Navigating the Cancer Journey Together

by Greg Pacini, MS, LPC, CGP, CHTP



Most likely, your partner wants to take your pain away – wants so much to help. But your caregiver really doesn’t know what you’re going through. When you tell your caregiver what you need, you help that person avoid making assumptions.

Many caregivers find it quite difficult to leave you or do things that are good for them. However, if that doesn’t happen, you might both live in the resentment that builds.

It’s very possible that you feel some degree of powerlessness, like you have little control over your emotions or the illness. Consequently, you may want something or someone to control, to feel mastery. This can feel like nit-picking to the person you love most.

Finally, your courage and heroism may uplift many. But if you never say no, take a break, or speak your needs directly, resentment can accumulate. That’s tough on your body and your relationships.

a wound. Compassionate, gentle caring and love may be the best thing you can do to help your survivor heal.

Your partner is busy taking care of him or herself. Don’t forget that you are responsible for *you*. A 2002 study in *Health Psychology* reported that chronic illness in a partner may negatively affect the caregiver’s physical and mental health.



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Don’t assume anything – ask. Don’t assume that the survivor needs to be cheered on. Don’t assume that he or she doesn’t.

Don’t assume that the survivor needs to feel hopeful today. Don’t assume that he or she doesn’t. Don’t assume that the survivor needs to eat more, visit more, exercise more, learn more, or sleep more. Instead, ask the simple

question, “What can I do for you right now that would be most helpful?”

And remember, what’s needed right now could change in less than an hour.

You may not have a diagnosed illness, but you do have the same rights as the survivor. Yes, you’re going to give the survivor more leeway. But don’t give yourself away in the process. Don’t let yourself be taken advantage of. That’s not good for anybody.

When you routinely tell everyone that your partner “Handles this so well,” you may be sending the message to that survivor, “I need you to be strong.” So who, then, is going to be strong for the survivor? Where is the survivor supposed to go with the tough emotions that naturally occur during an illness?

Supporting Each Other Accept one another where you are, not where you think the other should be. If either of you acts like nothing ever happened, then eventually your emotions will act on you. Life before cancer may be quite different than life after, but there is still life. The same is true with the physical intimacy you share. Respect, sensitivity, openness, and lots of dialogue can help you maintain high degrees of intimacy in your relationship, even if physical intimacy is restricted.

Editor’s Note: Greg Pacini, MS, LPC, CGP, CHTP, is a Licensed Professional Counselor with 25 years in the counseling profession, specializing for the last 15 years in supporting illness survivors, their caregivers, and the medical professionals who serve them. Greg based this article on text from his book, *Journey Beyond Diagnosis: Support During and After Illness for Survivors and Those Who Love and Care for Them* (Reedy Press 2005). Visit www.gregpacini.com for more information. ■