

# What's Happening to the One We Love?



**Helping co-survivors cope  
with breast cancer**



When someone you love has breast cancer, they may face physical and emotional struggles. You want to do all you can to support them. You're a co-survivor. A co-survivor is a person who lends support to someone with breast cancer. They include family members, spouses or partners, friends, health care providers and colleagues.

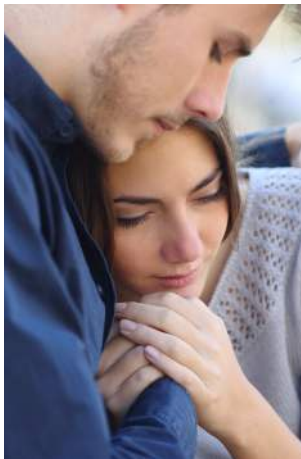
This booklet provides information on how you can better understand what your loved one is going through and what they may need. It provides ideas on how you can help. It also explores ways you can learn to cope with your own feelings.



## What your loved one may be feeling

A breast cancer diagnosis can cause sudden and intense emotions. These feelings can include fear, anger, frustration, depression or helplessness. These emotions are normal. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to feel. Allow your loved one to share their feelings openly and honestly with you. If you share your own thoughts and feelings, they may realize it's OK for them to do the same.

Keep a positive outlook, but also be realistic. Pay attention to their needs and listen to what they're saying and asking. They may not be looking to you for answers. They may just need to vent and know they can talk to you and know they're accepted.



“ I remember feeling numb when I was diagnosed, then so afraid, angry and frustrated. I remember thinking — ‘I may have to have a breast removed, I may lose my life to this disease.’ I wanted so much for my family to be there for me, to listen and to let me be myself without having to be strong or to put up a front.”

## Your relationship

Each relationship is unique and develops over time. You may have a close or distant relationship. You may live across the country or just across town from each other or even in the same house. No one knows more about your relationship than you.

Illness can bring friends and family closer together, but the stress of the illness can also make problems in your relationship clearer. Talk with your loved one. Be open and honest. This can help your relationship during this stressful time.

### Communication tips:

- Spend time together — face-to-face, by phone or video call.
- Tell your loved one how you feel or write a note.
- Listen to them and allow them to complete their thoughts before you respond.
- Don't be afraid to say the word “cancer.”
- Don't be afraid of silence or strong emotions such as anger, fear or tears.
- Give them a hug or hold their hand. This can say much more than words.



## How your loved one copes

Your loved one may try to find information or plan for the future. They may ask for help, need to vent their feelings, avoid talking about it or even deny a problem exists. All these responses are normal.

If you fear your loved one isn't coping well, try to talk about your concerns. Encourage them to talk about their feelings. They may feel more comfortable talking with other family members or friends about certain aspects of their illness.

### Here are some signs your loved one is coping:

- Getting information and asking questions
- Accepting they have breast cancer
- Going to their medical appointments
- Staying positive
- Maintaining self-confidence

## How you can help

### Provide practical support

One way you can help your loved one cope is to provide them with practical help. If they're physically able, it's important for them to continue with their usual activities. But there will be times when they need help with such things as housework, paying bills, doing errands or driving kids to school. You can help with some of these daily tasks. Work as a team. Here are some ways you can help:

#### If you live in the same house...

- Help with the daily chores – go food shopping, cook dinner, do the laundry, clean the house, etc.
- Offer to take them to the doctor and take notes.

- Be there for them when they need a hug or need to cry.
- Gather information for them when they're too tired.
- Offer to make phone calls and screen calls or visitors.
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#### If you live nearby...

- Invite them over for dinner or take them dinner.
- Call to see if you can pick up anything at the store.
- Offer to go to doctor visits or support group meetings with them.
- Get them out of the house by taking them for a drive or to a movie.
- Offer to come over to clean the house and do laundry.
- Offer to take kids to school or activities.
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#### If you live out of town...

- Send restaurant gift cards or home-baked goods.
- Coordinate a group gift of a grocery delivery service.
- Send a copy of your favorite book or movie.
- Help celebrate holidays by sending flowers or decorations.
- Write letters, cards, poems or words of inspiration.

## Provide emotional support

You can help whether you live close by or far away. You can make a difference and try to make them feel better.

Ask them to tell you what they want and what they don't want.

### Here are some tips.

- Make time to be together.
- Listen quietly.
- Gather information to help them make decisions.
- Accept and respect their feelings and decisions.

**One-on-one counseling** – Licensed psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, social workers, patient navigator or clergy are trained in the area of cancer or chronic illness. They can help provide coping strategies, as well as treat or help reduce anxiety or depression. The doctor, oncology nurse, social worker or patient navigator can provide a list of trained cancer counselors.



## Provide empathy

Empathy is sincerely trying to share your loved one's emotions. You can't know exactly what they're going through. But you can tell them you're trying to understand what they're feeling. It won't always be easy for them to express their thoughts and feelings. Pay attention to what they're saying and what they're not saying. Ask questions and let them know you're there to listen when they're ready to talk.

### Where do you begin? Try asking...

"I really want to understand. Can you tell me about it? I am ready to listen when you want to talk."

"How was your doctor visit? Are you concerned? Let's talk about it. I want to know what you're feeling."

"I'll never know exactly what you're feeling, but can we talk about it? I'll do my best to understand and to be here for you."

"Is there anyone else you would like to talk with about your feelings? Would you like me to call them?"

## Provide acceptance and assurance

A breast cancer diagnosis can have an impact on self-image. By telling your loved one you love them for who they are — not for what they do or how they look — can help confirm their identity. Reassure them they're not alone.

### Write down your answers to these questions:

- What are the qualities in them you love and admire?

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- How have they helped you get through tough times in the past?

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- How do they make you feel happy?

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- In what ways do they provide emotional and spiritual support to you and others in your family?

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By sharing your answers to these questions, you can help them remember they're not a "breast cancer patient," but a friend and an important member of your family.



## Allow your loved one to show their feelings

It's important to allow your loved one to express their feelings. Tears and anger are ways to vent feelings. Remember these reactions aren't directed at you, but at the situation. Fatigue, depression and mood swings may be related to the diagnosis or treatment. Showing you love and accept them will help them realize it's safe for them to express these feelings.

- Allow them to say what's on their mind.
- Allow them to be angry.
- Let them know it's OK for them to cry, be sad or even be silent with you.
- Accept they may choose to talk to others.

## Gather information

Seeking information is an important part of coping. You may not be able to provide all the answers, but you can help find them. By helping to gather the information, you can help your loved one regain control of the situation. You can help them make decisions they'll feel good about.

### Here are some suggestions on how you can help:

- Make a list of questions to ask the doctor.
- Offer to go to doctor appointments and help voice concerns and questions.
- Find information about your loved one's diagnosis and treatment options.
- Help find a doctor for a second opinion by asking friends, or by contacting the physician referral services at local hospitals specializing in breast cancer or women's health.
- Help find a support group by asking the oncology nurse, patient navigator, social worker or doctor.





## Your needs

You need support, too. You may feel scared, angry, frustrated or anxious. You may try to be “strong” by hiding your feelings and your fears.

For parents, learning a son or daughter has breast cancer can be hard and may cause feelings of anger. A parent may ask – “Why my child?” or “Why are they having to face a diagnosis of cancer and not me?”

For a sister or daughter, a breast cancer diagnosis may cause you to question your own risk of getting the disease.

For brothers or sons, you may be in denial or become overprotective.

Your own support needs are unique. There’s no right or wrong way to feel. It’s important to take care of your own needs during this difficult time. You may be so busy caring for their needs that you neglect your own emotions.

### Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I need someone to listen to me?
- Do I need information about my own risk of breast cancer?
- Do I need other family members or friends to help care for them?
- Do I need others to support me and my family through their thoughts and prayers?
- Do I need to set aside some time for myself?



## Ask for help

You know how important it is for your loved one to get emotional and practical support through this difficult time. You know they should not and cannot do everything on their own, nor should you.

Now that you have identified areas where you can use some help, the next step is getting it. You may feel strange or even guilty about asking for help for yourself. But we all need support at times.

**Ask yourself:**  
“Who would I feel most comfortable talking to? How can they help?”

The best way to take care of your loved one is to make sure you take care of yourself first so you can be present for them. If not, you run the risk of becoming worn out or resentful over time. Don’t be afraid to reach out to others to get the support and help you need. Sometimes all it takes is asking.

### Finding someone outside of your family to talk to about your thoughts and feelings may help.

Use this space to list the names and phone numbers of the people you can turn to for help.

	Name	Phone number
Counselor	_____	_____
Friend(s)	_____	_____
Clergy	_____	_____
Social worker	_____	_____
Support group	_____	_____

## A final thought

You may not be able to do everything. Just by caring enough to read this booklet you are making a difference. Although your future may hold some painful times, sharing in your loved one’s fight for recovery provides a way for you to strengthen your relationship and get through this together.

**You can help.**



## Resources for the family

**Susan G. Komen®** offers a Breast Care Helpline service to those in need of breast health and breast cancer information and support.

1-877-465-6636

Se habla español.

TTY is available. Please use your preferred relay service or dial 711 then 1-877-465-6636.

[komen.org](http://komen.org)

Hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET/6 a.m. to 7 p.m. PT

**American Cancer Society** has a national network of employees and volunteers who implement research, education and patient service programs to help cancer patients and their families cope with cancer. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-ACS-2345

[cancer.org](http://cancer.org)

**CancerCare®** offers free counseling and emotional support, information about cancer and treatments, financial assistance, educational seminars and referral to other support services. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-813 HOPE

[cancer.org](http://cancer.org)

**Cancer Information Service**, a part of the National Cancer Institute, has information specialists that are available to help answer your cancer-related questions whether you are a patient, family member or friend, health care provider, or researcher. Se habla español.

Phone: 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237)

[cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov)

**The Cancer Support Community** is a cancer support organization devoted solely to providing free psychological and emotional support to cancer patients and their families.

Phone: 1-888-793-WELL

[cancersupportcommunity.org](http://cancersupportcommunity.org)

**Mautner Project of Whitman-Walker Health** offers support programs (online and telephone) for lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals living with cancer, and their partners.

[whitman-walker.org](http://whitman-walker.org)

This list of resources is made available solely as a suggested resource. Please note that it is not a complete listing of materials or information available on breast health and breast cancer. This information is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or to replace the services of a medical professional. Further, Susan G. Komen® does not endorse, recommend or make any warranties or representations regarding the accuracy, completeness, timeliness, quality or non-infringement of any of the materials, products or information provided by the organizations referred to in this list.



**1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)**  
**komen.org**

**Other resources in this series:**

- [What's Happening to Mom?](#) *Talking to your children about breast cancer*
- [What's Happening to Me?](#) *Coping and living with breast cancer*

We would like to extend thanks to breast cancer survivors, their children, and our panel of professional experts who helped in the development of this booklet.