

# What's Happening to the One **We Love?**



*Helping co-survivors cope  
with breast cancer*





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

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



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## 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 ones to openly and honestly share their feelings with you. If you share your own thoughts and feelings, they may realize that it is okay for them to do the same.

Keep a positive outlook, but also be realistic. Pay attention to their needs and listen to what they are saying and asking. They may not be looking to you for answers. They may just need to know that they can talk to you and know that they are 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, with friends or family, is unique and develops over a lifetime. You may have a close or distant relationship with your loved one. 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 do.



Illness can bring friends and family members closer together, but the stress of the illness can also make problems in your relationship more clear. 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 or by phone.
- Tell your loved one how you feel or write a letter.
- 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, answers 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 that your loved one is not coping well, try to talk about your concerns. They may feel more comfortable talking with other family members or friends about certain aspects of their illness. Encourage them to talk about their feelings with you or another co-survivor, such as their partner, another family member, a member of their church, a friend or even a counselor.



Here are some signs that your loved one is coping:

- Getting information and asking questions
- Accepting that she/he has breast cancer
- Staying positive
- Maintaining self-confidence



# How you can help

## Provide practical support

One way you and your family can help your loved one cope is to provide them with practical help. If they are physically able, it is important for them to continue with 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 that you can help:

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

- Help with the daily chores — go food shopping, cook dinner, do the laundry, wash the car, 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 are 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 more often or bring them dinner.
- Call to see if you can pick up anything at the store.
- Offer to go to doctor visits or support group meetings.
- Get them out of the house by taking them 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 certificates or home-baked goods.
- Send a copy of your favorite book or video.
- Help celebrate holidays by sending flowers or decorations.
- Write letters, cards, poems or words of inspiration.
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## Provide emotional support

You, a co-survivor, 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 do not want. Take time to talk about how you can help them.

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

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



## Provide empathy

Empathy is sincerely trying to share your loved one's emotions. You cannot know exactly what they are going through. But you can tell them that you are trying to understand what they are feeling. It will not always be easy for them to express their thoughts and feelings. Pay attention to what they are saying and what they are not saying. Ask questions and let them know you are there to listen when they are 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 that you love them for who they are — not for what they do or how they look — can help confirm their identity. Reassure them that they are not alone, but a member of your family. 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 that they are not a “breast cancer patient,” but a friend and an important member of your family.

## Allow your loved one to show their feelings

It is important to allow your loved one to express their feelings.

Tears and anger are ways to vent feelings. Remember these reactions are not directed at you, but at the situation. Fatigue, depression and mood swings may be related to the diagnosis or treatment. Showing that you love and accept them will help them realize that it is safe for them to express these feelings.



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

## Gather information

Information seeking 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 make decisions they will feel good about. Here are some suggestions on how you can help:

- Help make a list of questions to ask the doctor.
- Offer to go to doctor appointments and help voice concerns and questions.
- Help 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 your physician referral services at local hospitals that specialize in breast cancer or women's health.
- Help find a support group by asking the oncology nurse, social worker or doctor.

## Your needs

You need support too. You may also feel fearful, angry, frustrated or anxious. You may try to be “strong” by hiding your feelings and your fears. For parents, learning that 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 over protective. Your personal support needs are unique. There is no right or wrong way for you to feel. It is important that you 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 in their life. 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 as people, we all need each other to turn to for help 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 as well. If not, you run the risk of becoming worn out or resentful over time. Do not hesitate to reach out to others to get the support and help you need. Sometimes all it takes is asking.

Finding someone outside 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.

	<i>Name</i>	<i>Phone number</i>
<i>Counselor</i>	_____	_____
<i>Friend(s)</i>	_____	_____
<i>Clergy</i>	_____	_____
<i>Social worker</i>	_____	_____
<i>Support group</i>	_____	_____

## **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. Se habla español. TDD available.

Phone: 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)

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

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

**Susan G. Komen® Message Boards** offer online forums for breast cancer survivors and co-survivors to share their experiences and advice with others affected by breast cancer.

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

**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

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

[www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.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

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

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

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

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.

**Notes:**

## Notes:





1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-465-6636)  
[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

**Other booklets in this series:**

- What's Happening to Me?  
*Coping and living with breast cancer*
  
- What's Happening to Mom?  
*Talking to your children about 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.