



Caring for Yourself During Cancer Treatment

Are You Getting the Love and
Support that You Need?



MASSACHUSETTS
GENERAL HOSPITAL

CANCER CENTER

The words “you have cancer” can bring sudden changes to your daily life. It can be even more overwhelming if your intimate partner controls or abuses you. Now, more than ever, you will need support and care from others.

This pamphlet will give you information about what Intimate Partner Abuse is and how it might affect your health. It will also explain ways to get the support you need during your cancer treatment.

Abuse or controlling behavior by others

Other relationships can be abusive or controlling as well, such as those with caregivers, adult children, or siblings. If this is your situation, some of the information in this pamphlet may be helpful to you. Talk with a member of your treatment team. They can help you find the support you need.

Courageous women and men living with cancer inspired this pamphlet. We have used their actual words to tell their experience with controlling or abusive relationships. By sharing their stories with you, they hope you will find your own new sources of strength.*

*No real names or photos have been used.

In this pamphlet you will learn how to:

- Recognize when you are in an abusive relationship
- Identify when abuse is affecting your health
- Develop more ways to cope and feel better
- Find resources that can help



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What is an abusive or controlling relationship?

Abuse is a pattern of control by one intimate partner over another. The intimate partner may be a current or former spouse or dating partner. Abuse can be emotional or verbal and may include control over money or control over who you see or when you see others. Abuse can also include threats, stalking, and physical or sexual abuse.

Intimate partner abuse is sometimes called domestic violence. It is important to understand that you **do not** have to be physically abused to be in an abusive relationship.

Anna's Story

My husband is not physically abusive, but controls my time and our finances. When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, his response was to ignore both me and the cancer. After my mastectomy, he expected me to do errands and cook, even though I was exhausted and needed to rest. He didn't want me to get chemotherapy, because he wanted me to return to work sooner. I got chemo in spite of this, and when I became upset about losing my hair, he was very unsympathetic. Fortunately, I have been able to turn to my family and friends for support.



Who is most often involved in an abusive relationship?

Anyone can be abused — Women and Men of all ages, races, cultures, religions, and sexual orientations.

Sometimes it is hard to realize that you are in a controlling or abusive relationship. You may feel that you are to blame for how your partner treats you.

Does your intimate partner or spouse:

- Keep you from getting support from others?
- Blame you when things go wrong?
- Keep you from getting enough rest?
- Call you names?
- Criticize your appearance?
- Act like nothing has changed since your cancer diagnosis?
- Expect you to do routine chores even when you don't feel well?
- Limit how much money you can spend?
- Threaten you or others?
- Push, hit, or hurt you?

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, you may be in an abusive relationship. No one deserves to be abused. You are not alone, and help is available.

Remind yourself that having cancer is not your fault. Taking care of yourself is an important part of your cancer treatment.

You need to focus on your health, which includes getting the emotional support you need. If you are in an abusive relationship, it may be difficult to put yourself first.

You can talk with any member of your cancer treatment team — your doctor, social worker, or nurse. They can help you find the support you need. Services in the hospital and community are often called domestic violence programs. These services are confidential and usually free. You do not have to be physically abused to seek help from a domestic violence program.

Intimate partner abuse can affect your mental and physical health. People who have experienced abuse are more likely to report:

- low self-esteem
- difficulty trusting others
- anxiety
- depression
- headaches
- back pain
- asthma
- arthritis
- gynecologic problems
- poor general health



In the following pages, you will learn more about how to cope with the physical and emotional changes a diagnosis of cancer and its treatment can bring. Learning about ways to care for yourself and get the help you need from others can improve your physical and emotional health. There is also a list of resources at the end of this pamphlet.

Cassie's Story

Cassie and her ex-husband have been divorced for several years, but he still visits their two daughters regularly. They get along okay for a day or two, but if he stays longer, he often becomes abusive. After Cassie's surgery for melanoma, she had no energy to argue with her ex-husband. As she put it, "He would come and be all over my case about how this place is a mess, when are you gonna get up out of bed, when are you gonna get a job?" Cassie believed her ex-husband's put-downs made her anxiety and depression much worse.



Coping with Feelings

Each person experiences and copes with cancer differently. Often people going through cancer treatment talk about feeling sad, worried, depressed, or anxious. These feelings are normal. Sometimes it's hard to know when additional help is needed to cope with these feelings. Many people who are depressed think they are not trying hard enough to be positive and hopeful.

"Because of the stress I was under, I wasn't healing properly . . . I wasn't sleeping, I wasn't eating right. Part of me wanted to drive off a cliff . . ."

—Latitia, following her mastectomy for breast cancer

Here are some thoughts and feelings that can help you know that your depression needs to be treated. A person who is depressed will have these thoughts or feelings often, usually every day. No matter how hard you try, these feelings and thoughts don't go away. Sometimes even when you are busy or having a good day they will suddenly "pop-up."

- Sad, hopeless, or "empty" most of the time
- Often irritated or angry
- No one cares about you or you are worthless
- Negative thoughts or blaming yourself for everything
- You want to disappear, escape life, or kill yourself

If you have any of these feelings or thoughts, tell a member of your treatment team. Getting treatment for depression is an important first step in coping with cancer and your relationship.

Bianca's Story

My boyfriend told me he wished I would die. I felt he was trying to destroy me. When I was going through treatment for cervical cancer, I was exhausted because he expected me to do all the housework. He also ruined my credit and was physically and sexually abusive. He even tried to turn my family and friends away from me. I felt so alone and helpless. I ended up missing more than half of my cancer appointments because I didn't care anymore. I just wanted to sleep the pain away.



Depression can make it hard for you to follow through with instructions and appointments. As a result, you may feel worse and experience more treatment side effects. Depression may also make it harder to cope with any abuse you are experiencing. Treatment for depression can help you feel better and stronger.

What else can I do to take care of myself?

Here are some steps you can take:

- Eat a healthy diet. It may be helpful to talk to a nutritionist.
- Exercise to help improve your overall sense of well-being.
- Try to get enough sleep at night and rest during the day.
- Think positively. Avoid negative thoughts about yourself.
- Ask someone supportive to come with you to your treatments.
- Take time for activities that you enjoy.
- Make yourself and your health a top priority.

It is important to set aside time every day to do things that help you relax and feel better.

“I knew I only had to get through that one day.
Things to do today: breathe in, breathe out.
Repeat as necessary.”

—Sasha, following her surgery for colon cancer

Listed below are some activities that others have found helpful:

- Go for a walk
- Listen to music
- Take a bath
- Write in a journal
- Practice yoga or tai chi
- Play a game
- Meditate
- Knit or sew
- Get a massage
- Read a book
- Draw
- Meet up with friends



Write down activities that you enjoy:

Building a Support Network

One of the most important things you can do when facing cancer and abuse is surround yourself with supportive people. Social support can help reduce anxiety, stress, and depression and allow you to focus on healing.

In addition to getting help from friends and family, you may find it helpful to talk to a counselor or participate in a support group. Support can also come from unexpected places, for example, people in your exercise class or your hairdresser.

Potential Sources of Support



“It feels good when you can just tell somebody stuff that you have bottled up.”

—Jasmine, who has lung cancer

People you can talk to about your situation:

Support Groups are available for both cancer patients and people who experience intimate partner abuse. For information about support services in your area, ask your social worker, nurse, or doctor. Also see the list of resources at the end of this pamphlet.



“I have very kind friends, but you really can’t understand unless you’ve gone through cancer. The women in my support group empowered and informed each other. They were supportive and kind. That really helped me tremendously.”

—Paula, following surgery for breast cancer

Do you have enough help with daily activities?

Friends and family are often the best source of help for day-to-day activities. Different people may be willing to help you in various ways, such as with child care, shopping, cooking, or driving you to appointments. Often friends and family want to help but don't know how.

If someone offers to help, it's okay to say yes!

To regain your strength, it's important to accept help when it's offered and ask for help when you need it.

What daily chores or errands do you need help with?

People who can help you with daily activities:

Gary's Story

My partner tried to make me feel guilty for getting lymphoma. He isolated me from my friends and controlled our finances. I thought about leaving him. But he told me if I left, I'd have no one to take care of me if I got sick. I felt stuck. I had no energy and no money. But now I realize I didn't have to live with him. Any one of my friends would have taken me in.



What are your sources of strength?

Strength to keep going in the face of tremendous difficulties can come from many sources. These may include your faith, family, friends, work, travel, hobbies, or the desire to see children and grandchildren grow. In difficult times, you may find inner strength you never knew you had.

What keeps you going?

Part of feeling stronger may involve taking more control over your life — making the best choices you can about what is right for you.

“Love is from the person you are inside. It took me a long time to really believe that somebody’s going to love me for me, not for what I look like, not for what I can do for them, but for who I am inside.”

—Diane, following surgery for uterine cancer

Moving Forward

For some people, discovering that they have the strength to face cancer gives them the courage to make other changes in their lives. A domestic abuse advocate or oncology social worker can be an important resource to help you heal and move ahead safely.

Remember:

YOU are a beautiful human being. YOU deserve to love and be loved for who you are. Surround yourself with people who remind you of this every day.

Simone’s Story

I can’t say exactly how it happened, but I just decided that I was going to live. I felt like I still had so much more to do. I was going to survive cancer and make a life for myself. Even though my husband and I are still in the same household, I really live my own life.



Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) Resources

- **An Oncology Social Worker** is part of your cancer treatment team. Let a member of your treatment team know that you would like to talk with a social worker. You can also call 617-724-1822 to reach the social worker on your team.
- **The Maxwell V. Blum Cancer Resource Room** is located in the Yawkey building on the 8th floor. The staff in the Blum Cancer Resource Room can help you find information about your diagnosis and treatment, as well as hospital and community resources. The Blum Cancer Resource Room is also a comfortable place to relax. You may also call 617-724-1822 with your questions.
- **HOPES Program** holds workshops in the Blum Cancer Resource Room that can help you take care of yourself. Try gentle yoga, Qigong, or a managing stress workshop. Look for the HOPES Calendar or call 617-724-6737.
- **HAVEN at MGH** (Hospitals Helping Abuse and Violence End Now) is the domestic violence program at Massachusetts General Hospital. HAVEN provides advocacy, supportive counseling, and groups for survivors of abuse. HAVEN also offers trainings, consultations, and policy development for MGH providers and the wider community.

Contact HAVEN:

Main Campus in Boston: 617-724-0054

MGH Revere Health Center: 781-485-6108

MGH Chelsea Health Center: 617-887-3513

haven@partners.org

www.havenatmgh.org

Intimate Partner Abuse Resources

National Domestic Violence Hotline:

Toll free: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

1-800-787-3224 (TTY)

Online: www.ndvh.org

Massachusetts Domestic Abuse Hotline SAFELINK:

Toll free: 1-877-785-2020

National Sexual Assault Hotline:

Toll free: 1-800-656-4673

Jane Doe Inc.: The Massachusetts Coalition Against Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence:

Online: www.janedoe.org

Futures Without Violence:

Online: www.endabuse.org

Notes



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Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center
55 Fruit Street
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massgeneral.org/cancer

For additional copies, call
Maxwell V. Blum Cancer Resource Room
Yawkey Center for Outpatient Care, 8th floor
Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center
617.724.1822