

Massachusetts General Hospital BMT Survivorship Program

Communication and Relationships After BMT

Relationships Can Change after Cancer

“Now that my treatment is over, my husband thinks I am perfectly cured and is unwilling to discuss the illness further.” Cancer can change relationships. Some relationship changes are not so clear-cut. Other changes are more complicated or subtle. Even when relationships do not change much, there can be areas of difficulty.

Problems can occur when others hold unrealistic expectations about BMT recovery. It is common for friends and family to think that when treatment ends, life goes back to “normal.” Just as it is important for you to hold realistic expectations, your loved ones also need to learn about what to expect during this transition.

Your Partner and Their Emotional Reactions

If you are in an intimate relationship, BMT will most likely have a strong impact on your partner. Partners have many of the same emotional reactions that survivors do. Research suggests that they can become even more upset than patients. Partners often worry about how they can help you. Many partners report that they want to be helpful, but that they don’t know what to do. These feelings can lead to frustration, withdrawal, and feeling out of control.

How your partner copes with your recovery can have a big impact on how you feel. It is rare for a relationship to end just because of BMT. Some ongoing, committed relationships can become stronger through coping with BMT. Many patients gain a new perspective on what is important in life and so can their partners.

The best route for strengthening a relationship and providing mutual support

Listening

The most important part of effective communication is active listening.

Be Open: Set aside your biases. If you are busy mentally collecting arguments so you can win an argument, you are not listening. Your goal is to hear and understand.

Ask Questions: Ask questions to show the other person you are interested.

Paraphrase: Restate, in your own words, what the other person has said to show you have absorbed the meaning of the other’s words.

Show Empathy: Empathy means understanding and identifying with another person’s feelings. You may not agree with the other person’s point of view, but you are trying to understand their perspective. Show empathy by making facial expressions that mirror the other person’s feelings and by offering supportive comments, like “you seem troubled” or “that must be difficult for you.”

Non-Verbal Communication

We communicate with our words and with our body language.

Eye Contact: Direct eye contact means you are listening. Not making eye contact can mean you feel embarrassed, distracted, or uncomfortable or give someone the impression that you are not telling the truth.

Facial Expressions: A friendly and interested expression makes people want to talk to you. A frown and raised eyebrows tell people you do not approve.

Gestures: Gestures help others understand you. You can tell another person you're paying attention by nodding your head. Playing with your hair or tapping your foot says you're bored or distracted. Body

Posture: Sitting upright in an open and relaxed posture can give the impression that you are alert and available to communicate.

Expressing Yourself Clearly

When you express yourself fully, you communicate your observations, thoughts, feelings, and needs. Those close to you need to know all aspects of your experience to really know you. When you leave these details out, others sense something is missing, and they feel confused or suspicious because they're only getting a partial message from you.

Observations: Concise and specific statements of fact. *Thoughts:* Beliefs, theories, and conclusions based on your observations.

Feelings: Subjective emotional experiences, such as feeling happy, sad, scared, lonely, or elated.

Needs: Simple statements about what would help or please you. They are neither right or wrong. When problems arise in your relationship, refrain from blaming or name-calling. Open a discussion by expressing yourself clearly.

New Partners after Bone Marrow Transplant

Many people worry about how to meet a new partner or how to discuss their BMT with a potential new partner.

Here are some tips:

- Think about what you want your partner to know about your experience and understand about you
- Plan ahead using the communication strategies listed on the front side of this sheet
- Think about what types of responses you would want from your partner
- Think about your needs and how you can express them clearly

Relationship Building Exercise

Take a moment to review this section and write a few sentences about any changes or issues that have come up with your partner. Have there been any positive or negative changes resulting from your diagnosis and treatment? _____

Are there any issues that require your attention? _____

How might you use approach coping strategies to make some changes? _____

Relationship Building Exercises (approx 30 minutes each)

1. Pretend you are writing a biography about your partner. Have them tell you their story. You can split this activity up into past, present, and future. What was your partner's childhood like? Hopes and dreams? Childhood friends and activities? Current passions? Closest friends? Future goals? Be creative with your questions. Now switch roles and have your partner interview you.
2. Think about a new activity you can try together, something out of both of your comfort zones. Try to schedule a new activity once a month, once every two weeks, once a week, whatever makes sense for you. It can be small (like trying a new type of cuisine at a restaurant) or large (like taking a trip together). There are no right or wrong activities- just try something new!
3. Think about one life goal you have for the future. Ask your partner what their life goal is for the future. Discuss ways you both can support each other to reach those goals. Discuss why each of you value those goals and how you would feel if you accomplished those goals. Let your partner help you and influence you.
4. Do you feel like you and your partner run out of things to say? Create a jar of conversation starters/ topics. Pick one out of the jar at random and talk to each other about that topic: last book you read or movie you saw, favorite TV character, ideal vacation, challenge at work, and so on.
5. Write a letter to your partner thanking them for anything, such as for having certain attributes or being supportive in a certain situation. Be as specific and explain how their actions/ qualities/ etc. have positively influenced you. Then read it out loud to your partner.
6. Schedule a time when both of you can discuss a conflict. Either resolve, or agree to disagree during that time, and then move forward. Do not discuss the conflict outside of the scheduled time. If you would like to discuss the conflict more, schedule another time. The goal is to prevent the conflict from interfering with other activities.

The above information, exercises, and aspects were adapted and taken from: Leedham Ph.D. and Beth E Meyerowitz, Ph.D., Patricia Ganz, M.D., Julia Rowland, Ph.D., and Annette L. Stanton, Ph.D., Moving Beyond Cancer Booklet; Gottman, J.M., & Silver, N. The seven principles for making marriage work. Three Rivers Press: New York, 1999; Seligman, M.E.P., Rashid, T., Parks, A.C., American Psychologist 61(8), Nov 2006, 774-788.