

Listening and Talking:

Family Communication and Prostate Cancer

Open communication with family members helps you and your loved ones deal with the stress of cancer and cancer treatments. But, it's not easy. Sometimes people are not able to listen well and don't always understand their choices or feelings. Sometimes, people say the wrong thing, even though they don't mean to, but it's hurtful anyway. It is important to understand barriers to good family communication, and to make sure that both patients and their families are heard, understood, and valued.

Families dealing with cancer share common communication challenges.

Here are communication problems that families often run into.

- **Being over protective.**

Some patients and their families try to hide their feelings, especially worries and fears. They don't want to upset or burden the other person. They may also 'protect' the other person by not talking about cancer at all, or by changing the subject if it comes up. Though patients and families mean well, being too protective and hiding feelings can increase stress. Patients and family members who share their feelings, including fear and sadness, are better able to give and get support from each other.



- **Being insensitive.**

At times, patients or family members may say things to each other that are too blunt or hurtful. They may get frustrated and 'dump' their feelings on others. They may give advice about how to fix a situation when it would be more helpful to just listen to the other person. Being careful with your words can help others feel understood and supported.

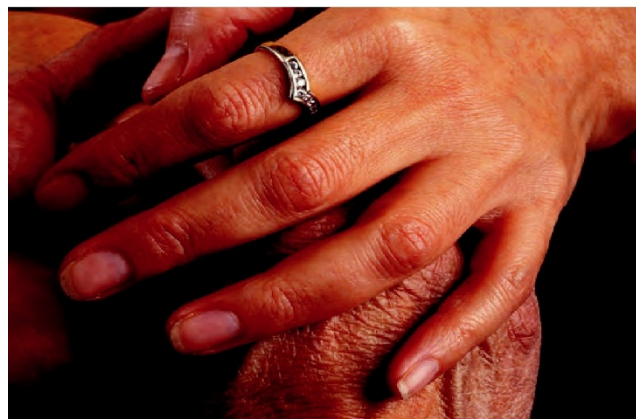
- **Dealing with old family or personal issues.**

Some families have old problems or issues that can get in the way of clear, kind listening and talking. Putting these issues aside, at least for the time being, may help everyone communicate better and cope with the cancer.

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- **Dealing with difficult topics.**

Topics like death and sexual concerns are hard for everyone to talk about. Patients and their family members may worry about feeling upset or embarrassed by these topics. But, people may find that they feel better after talking about these difficult topics.



Dealing with cancer offers a chance to learn, to listen and talk with each other.

Here are some tips to help you practice.

Listening might be the first step.

Most of us think that communication means talking. It does, but it also means listening and watching. It's not easy to listen and understand when emotions run high. 'Active listening' means that you focus your attention on the other person and try not to be distracted.

Tips for Active Listening:

Create a peaceful setting. Turn off the TV and phones. Try to choose time to listen and talk when you're not tired.

Show others you want to listen. It helps if your body is relaxed and your eyes and face show kindness. Make eye contact during the conversation.

Try to understand the other person's feelings along with his or her words. Ask questions if you're not sure you understand.

Do not interrupt. Let the other person finish speaking before you reply.

Try not to fight or argue. If people feel 'attacked' with criticism or disapproval, they won't want to share thoughts or feelings.

More Communication Tips:

Working to improve your family's communication will make your family stronger. These are tips that other families facing cancer have used. Choose the ones that work for your family and practice them every day.

- **Think ahead about how listening and talking can help your family.**

- Some families set aside time for family meetings to make sure they can listen and talk with each other. They try to work as a team to support each other and solve problems.

- Remember that communication is an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

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It's OK to talk about big issues in small doses, especially with children.

— You don't have to share everything or talk about cancer 'all the time'. It's OK to have your own private thoughts. It's also OK to set cancer aside for a while and talk about other things in your life.

- **Stay in touch with each other's feelings as you communicate.**

— Be aware of how your comments might affect the other person.

— Try to understand the other person's point of view, even if it's different from yours. Try and put yourself in their place.

— Don't assume others know how you feel. Make an effort to share how things are going for you clearly and with kindness.

- **Show affection to those who mean the most to you. It costs nothing and means a lot.**

— Tell others you care about them.

— Show affection in ways that feel good to you and your family members—with a hug, a touch, a thank you, or even holding hands.

— Use positive words to show your love, especially when giving feedback and constructive criticism.

A Tip for Family Members: Get involved in the patient's care

If possible, go with the patient to medical appointments. This will allow you to get first-hand information and get answers to your own questions. Knowing what is going on will help family communication.

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Know When to Get Help

It is not unusual that patients and their families ask for help to deal with the stress of cancer. Learning to listen and talk together can provide benefits to your whole family. You can get help from your doctor, nurse, social worker, and clergy. Family counseling is one of the most effective means of directly addressing the communication problems in a family. If you're not sure where to turn, ask your healthcare team to refer you to a professionally licensed counselor.

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This guide contains general information and is not meant to replace consultation with your doctor or nurse.

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