

FEATURE STORY

For the Caregiver: A New Role

Navigating the challenging territory of caregiving

Being a caregiver is one of the most important—and loving—things you can do for someone. And, since you're reading this, you're likely one of the millions of Americans who are taking on this role. Navigating this new terrain isn't without its challenges, but, while everyone's cancer journey is unique, there are some caregiving tips that apply to nearly everyone.

Talk it out. Generally speaking, cancer does not move at breakneck speed, and it's important to take some time to process what's happening. Talk to the patient about the decisions that will need to be made right now, including second opinions and where to be treated.

Listen and learn. During appointments, take notes or, with the doctor's OK, record the session. If you have permission to talk with the doctor yourself, fine; otherwise, let the patient lead the conversation. Once the treatment plan has been determined by the medical team, get the plan in writing. Ask questions about any points that are not clear.

Be realistic about what's ahead. Treatment can be very taxing, both emotionally and physically, so you never want to minimize what you or your loved one is going through. Keep in mind that people react differently to different treatments. Also know that the toll chemo takes can be cumulative. The patient may feel fine at the outset of treatment but will likely feel worse before they start feeling better.

Kind gestures help. Small gifts and cards can help lift your loved one's spirits. Experts say it's completely normal for patients to experience days when they feel dejected, lonely, afraid, or depressed. Allow the patient some time and space to be alone.

Discuss legal and financial issues. If the patient hasn't already, they should take care of important affairs such as wills, living wills, and medical power of attorney. Even if the cancer has a high cure rate, it's something we should all do at some point. Also, consider reviewing financial details, such as bank accounts, tax documents, stocks, bonds, mutual funds, CDs, and contact information for financial advisers.

Allow the person their feelings. As a caregiver, you want to be sure the patient feels safe and comfortable expressing exactly how he or she feels. You don't want

them to feel like they have to be upbeat all the time.

Call a family meeting. Friends and family, regardless of distance, may want to be involved. Organize a family meeting, even by phone, to discuss who will do what. It's important for the patient to be involved, too. Quarterly or monthly follow-up meetings should be planned to allow for revisions to the caregiving plan.

Finally, if outside help is needed, be it a home health aide or hospice care, be honest with the patient. Ultimately, patients should maintain as much independence as they can and as much as possible, control decisions about their care.