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What Can Patients Do to Reduce a Spouse's Stress?

BY LACEY MEYER

There are many ways for patients to support a spouse in the caregiving role. Here are a few suggestions from Laurel Northouse, RN, PhD, professor of nursing and co-director of the Socio-Behavior Program at the University of Michigan Comprehensive Cancer Center, and Dick Croake, whose wife, Edith, has cared for him since his metastatic prostate cancer diagnosis in 2007.

Recognize that the caregiver has a need for information, too. Caregivers report more uncertainty about the illness than patients, Northouse says, partially because they don't always have access to the health care provider and, therefore, might not get their questions answered. If the caregiver can't attend a doctor's appointment, take notes and try to provide the caregiver with details about the visit. Or you could audio record the doctor's visit to play later for the caregiver.

Mutual support is important. Provide support to your caregiver by acknowledging when he or she does something nice, letting them know how helpful it was and that you appreciated it, and that you recognize the situation is difficult for them as well.

Reduce demands when possible. If the caregiver seems a bit overwhelmed, do a little extra when your energy and health allow.

Don't always assume the caregiver can fix everything. Acknowledge when certain situations call for outside help, such as a doctor, social worker, or counselor. Patients and caregivers can usually manage some of the stress brought on by cancer and its treatment, but if the stress becomes overwhelming, professional help may be needed, "which is perfectly normal and a very good coping strategy," Northouse says.

Show understanding for the challenges your partner faces as a caregiver. Dick Croake says he tries to put himself in his wife's shoes and have empathy for her situation. "I make more of an effort when I'm feeling irritable not to sound so irritable."