

## 34. Relationship with my Partner

When people are distressed they are most likely to turn to their spouse or partner for support. When both members of a couple are under stress, their relationship can become strained. One reason many couples struggle in the face of cancer is that the patient's partner is frequently highly distressed and in need of emotional support themselves. Cancer may not always cause problems, but it can often aggravate existing ones. Couples seem to manage best when they are able to discuss the real issues facing them (their private concerns as well as their shared ones) and how they will deal with the changes to their relationship. Attempting to avoid hurting one another can paradoxically lead couples to feel isolated from one another. Of course some partners discourage or withdraw from open communication in case they say 'the wrong thing', fearing they may make matters worse. The insistence on 'positive thinking' may stop couples discussing openly what they may be privately thinking and feeling (e.g. feelings of fear or despair).

### How can I manage this situation?

- *(Some of the suggestions in the section Relationship with Other Relatives or Friends might be helpful too)*
- Anxiety and depression are less likely to develop if couples are able to face the stress of cancer together. Remember that patients can support partners, as well as the other way round. Partners often try to protect each other from what they are feeling by not being honest and open about how they feel. Bringing your feelings into the open may help you understand each other, bring you closer together and enable you to move forward.
- Try to be clear about what you are feeling and thinking, but don't assume you know what your partner is feeling or thinking. People who have known one another a long time tend to think they can mind-read in this way!
- Do your best not to interrupt your partner when they are speaking; try to listen as well as talk. Acknowledge what your partner has said first, and only then respond to it openly, calmly and honestly.
- Fear is often expressed as anger, so think carefully if you find yourself criticising or being irritable with your partner. Remember that this is a stressful time for both of you and both of you need support, especially from each other. Try not to interrogate your partner, nor expect them to know immediately what you or they are feeling.
- Words may not always be as important as giving or receiving a hug from your partner.
- Being overly positive, giving advice or finding a solution is not always what is needed. Try instead to find out whatever your partner would really find it helpful to talk about.
- Don't worry about saying the 'wrong thing' — the important thing is to do your best to stay involved. Avoiding conversations with your partner can be particularly hurtful.
- If possible, find someone in addition to your partner whom you can talk to, and get support from, on a regular basis. It can sometimes be stressful for both of you if you are depending solely on your partner for support.
- Above all, remember that you and your partner (and other family members) may well have different ways of dealing with the situation you both face, and that this is natural. It helps though to acknowledge these differences and to accept that you may each have different needs and priorities at any particular time.
- If more serious problems seem to be developing in your relationship with your partner, speak to your GP about referring you both to a couple counselling service such as *Relate*.