



Cancer and the Family

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When someone we love is diagnosed with a serious illness, such as cancer, they aren't the only person affected—the entire family system is part of the journey. [Family Stress Theory](#) maintains that for a family to successfully adjust to a stressor, they need to work through it together.

Cancer is an insidious disease that affects many Americans yearly. [The American Cancer Society](#) predicted that over 2 million new cancer cases were expected to be diagnosed in the US in 2025, and that more than 618,000 people would die from the disease (the equivalent of about 1,700 deaths per day). Each of these patients and their family members will be faced with making sense of what a cancer diagnosis means in the context of their lives. What makes this even harder is that they need to figure it out while feeling stressed, scared, and physically and emotionally exhausted.

In most families, [role shifts](#) occur after a cancer diagnosis. For example, if the partner diagnosed with cancer is the primary chef in the household but can no longer prepare meals due to fatigue and illness from chemotherapy, another family member may take on the role of chef. For this role shift to be successful, communication is important among the entire family. Unfortunately, parents often try to hide their diagnoses from their children. Even young children can quickly notice that something is wrong. Unclear communication provides an opportunity for children to misunderstand what is really going on; they may think things are even worse than they really are.

In contrast, clear and honest communication can help reduce the distress that comes with a cancer diagnosis. It helps the family manage the changes together, instead of each family member feeling isolated and stressed. Family support has been linked to positive health outcomes and improved quality of life for patients with cancer.

Tips for patients and family members

- Remember that routine screenings and early detection of cancer can maximize the chances of a successful outcome.
- If you or someone you love is diagnosed with cancer, increase your knowledge about the specific cancer, treatment options, and the support available to you. [The American Cancer Society](#) and [The National Cancer Institute](#) provide comprehensive information for patients and families at all stages of the cancer journey.

- Explain the treatment process (in as much or as little detail as is age-appropriate) to all family members, while being honest about the fact that the outcome may be unpredictable.
- Look for ways to enjoy time together as a family on a regular basis. You may need to adjust your activities depending on how the patient is feeling that day. Similarly, it's ok for patients and family members to have activities they participate in on their own as well. Fun and humor can provide a much-needed break for cancer patients and their families.
- Recognize that noticeable physical changes may occur during the course of cancer treatment. It may be helpful to remind children that even if the person looks different, it's still the same person they know and love.
- Anxiety about finances, treatment effectiveness, cancer spreading, and death are common in cancer patients and their families. Reach out to family members, friends, support groups, and mental health professionals when you need to.

Talk to someone who can help! To find a licensed psychologist near you, use PPA's Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator>. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then "Resources" and then "Public Resources". PPA offers these articles for informational purposes only; they are not a substitute for professional diagnosis and treatment.