



## Breast Cancer Awareness: The Patient & 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 in 2021 there would be 1,762,450 new cases of cancer diagnosed and 606,520 cancer deaths in the United States. Furthermore, 30% of the cases in women would be breast cancer, which is the most prevalent site of cancer for women, by a 15% margin.

It is important to assign meaning to what a cancer diagnosis means for the patient and the family. The patient may experience significant emotional fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and cancer fatalism (the belief that cancer results in death). This belief is especially true of African American women who are less likely to have access to mammograms and other cancer screenings. Also, African American women are less likely to seek treatment due to mistrust of the medical community and role overload that sidelines physical health. Therefore, the meaning of a cancer diagnosis may differ for European vs. African American families.

In a family system, role shifts occur after a cancer diagnosis (Oktay et al., 2011). 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, the other partner or another family member may take on the role of chef. For this transition to be successful, communication is important among the entire family. However, parents tend to hide their diagnoses from their children. Considering the above example, the child may wonder why the family member that usually prepares meals is no longer in that role. Lack of communication leads to role confusion and provides an opportunity for children to create various meanings behind role shift—the child may think that the family member is dying thereby inducing distress within themselves.

Family coping is impacted by their ability to effectively communicate through life challenges, which may also reduce the distress that comes with a cancer diagnosis. It is important for the family to openly communicate and make sense of a cancer diagnosis, prognosis, and resulting role transitions for the family unit to remain healthy and supportive. Family support has been linked to positive health outcomes and improved quality of life.

### **Tips for patients, their families, and all**

- Routine screenings and early detection of breast cancer are important.
- Increase your knowledge about the specific cancer and available treatments (e.g., talk with your medical providers, get connected with hospital support groups).

- Explain the treatment process (in as much or as little detail as is age appropriate) to all family members, while working to accept that there may not be a clear course or meaning of a cancer diagnosis.
- Recognize that noticeable physical changes may occur such as mastectomy—seek therapeutic support while asking for support from others.
- Anxiety about finances, treatment effectiveness, cancer spreading, and death are a few of the things to expect while trying to navigate this process. Utilize your support systems, such as friends and family, as well as additional services like a mental health provider.

The above suggestions are not intended to substitute for professional help. Many professionals are offering psychotherapy via secure internet video connection currently. If you feel you would benefit from talking with a professional and would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our [Psychologist Locator](#). You can also ask your health care professional or a trusted friend to recommend a psychologist or other mental health professional.

Additional Resources:

[The American Cancer Society](#)

[National Breast Cancer Foundation](#)

[The Breast Cancer Crusade](#)

#### References

Oktaç, J.S., Bellin M.H., Scarvalone, S, Applig, S, Helzlsouer, K.J. (2011). Managing the impact of posttreatment fatigue on the family: breast cancer survivors share their experiences. *Family, Systems, & Health*. 127-137. doi: 10.1037/a0023947.