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Fact sheet

Breast Cancer: Coping With Your Changing Feelings

Having breast cancer can affect you in many different ways. For example, treatments change the way you look and how you feel about yourself and your body. The demands of treatment may also affect your personal relationships and make it difficult to manage all your responsibilities. Fortunately, these are challenges you don't have to face alone.

Here are some tips for coping with some of the difficult feelings that may come up with a breast cancer diagnosis and treatment:

Share your feelings. Talking about your emotions might be hard, but it can comfort you and those persons who care about you. When you tell someone who you love what you're feeling, you give that person a chance to support you. You also give your relationship with that person a chance to grow.

Be specific. When reaching out to others, be specific about the kind of support you want or need. Saying something like, "It would help me a lot if you could shop for groceries this week," or "Can you please drive me to my next appointment?" gives people a clear way to help. This approach cuts down on frustration for all involved and reassures your friends and family that they are being helpful.



Take steps to look and feel your best. Many women feel uncomfortable with their appearance after having surgery or chemotherapy. If you had breast surgery or are experiencing hair loss and changes in your physical appearance, learn about options available, such as breast prostheses and wigs. Give yourself time to adjust to any changes, and keep trying different solutions until you find what makes you feel most comfortable.

Let yourself feel loved and cared for. After a lumpectomy or mastectomy, a woman may find that regular activities, such as dressing or undressing, bathing, or being intimate with her partner or spouse give rise to complex emotions. Some women feel so different that they stop taking care of their emotional and physical needs. For example, a woman may pull away emotionally from her partner. But you can make other choices. Letting yourself be close to your partner or spouse, and allowing yourself to feel loved and cared for are things everyone deserves.

Talk to your spouse or partner about the physical closeness you need. Share how you feel about your body, and talk about what you think or worry that your partner is feeling. Whatever your needs are – whether you feel a need for physical affection, or if you are not yet interested in being physically intimate – let your partner know. Your partner is most likely waiting for your signal to know what to do, how to act, and what you need.

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Discuss any concerns with your doctor or nurse. If you feel you have lost the desire to be physically intimate, consider talking about this with your doctor or nurse. They can help you to understand the physical changes that may be causing these feelings. They can also suggest ways to help increase your interest in physical intimacy, address any physical concerns that may interfere with intimacy, and make appropriate referrals for other types of help.

Get help for lymphedema. Lymphedema is a painful swelling, usually in an arm or leg, which happens when the body's lymphatic fluid fails to circulate properly and builds up in the soft tissue instead. There are several ways to help manage lymphedema. Your doctor and nurse can make suggestions on how to prevent and reduce the swelling.

Learn more about breast cancer. Get reliable and practical information about breast cancer and breast cancer treatment from trusted sources. Having accurate information empowers you to make the choices that are right for you. The National Cancer Information Service (1-800-4-CANCER) is an excellent source of medical information. So are CancerCare's Telephone Education Workshops and Connect® booklets, which provide the latest cancer information straight from top experts.

Seek support. Joining a support group gives you a chance to share your emotions and learn from other women going through similar situations. CancerCare's support groups are led by professional oncology social workers. We offer face-to-face groups, as well as telephone and online support groups for individuals who do not feel well enough to travel to meetings.

You might also consider individual counseling. Speaking one-on-one with a trained counselor or oncology social worker can help you develop strategies for coping with some of the more complex feelings and concerns you may be managing.

CancerCare Can Help

CancerCare has a staff of professional oncology social workers that can help you cope with a cancer diagnosis. Our services, which include counseling, education, financial assistance, and practical help, are *completely free of charge*. Call us at **1-800-813-HOPE (4673)** to learn more, or visit us online at www.cancercares.org.

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This fact sheet was made possible by a grant from the Avon Foundation.



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