

8. KEEP LIFE AS NORMAL AS POSSIBLE

Try to maintain routines and activities around appointments, and plan ahead for things that bring pleasure so that your calendar isn't just filled with scans and appointments. It may be for a while you need to plan low-energy activities, short drives, or flexible outings with a Plan B, or work out other ways to participate. Time out from 'cancer talk' is also essential - plan 'date night' with a "no cancer" rule, or seek permission before raising medical topics. If intimacy has been impacted, additional information and strategies can help, so please talk to your team as this is a legitimate area of your health care.

9. HOLD REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF YOUR ADJUSTMENT

Diagnosis is hard and most people feel more confident once a treatment plan is in place, but ending treatment can also be unexpectedly tough. Your partner may miss the care team or face challenges with ongoing side effects, fatigue, and cognitive/hormonal changes, and may notice a shift in values and goals. You too may also experience fears for the future - especially if you're a natural worrier. It's common to feel impatient for life to return to "normal". This may also be a time to revisit intimacy – possibly with the aid of good communication, a flexible mindset, and a little humour! If this is an important area of your lives and you notice changes, there are many strategies that can help so please seek professional input.

10. RECOGNISE WHAT YOU'RE DOING WELL

Navigating cancer is tough for any couple, and we all try our best. Try new ideas for size, review what's working, ditch what isn't, and modify your approach as you go. There's no perfect formula - just what helps you both get through. Most couples agree they wouldn't wish this experience on anyone, but there may be things you may take away, such as strategies which have been helpful over this time. You may choose to celebrate milestones, reflect on achievements, and focus on bringing joy into your life again alongside meaning and purpose.



Clinical & Consulting
Psychologists
(02) 9453 3027
info@headwayhealth.com.au



Frenchs Forest | SAH Wahroonga | St Leonards | Mater North Sydney | Telehealth Australia wide

"What can I do?" Supporting your partner through cancer

A cancer diagnosis is life-changing - not only for the person receiving it, but also for partners, family, friends, colleagues, and your wider social circle. As a partner, you may find yourself asking: "What can I do?", "What should I say?", "How do I help?", and "How do I cope?" We share practical suggestions from couples, partners, and health professionals which you may wish to consider when navigating this time.

As well as feeling for your partner, it's common to feel overwhelmed and side-swiped by your own reactions. You too may experience worry, grief, anger, confusion, and exhaustion - sometimes all in one day. Initially you may find it hard to concentrate, make decisions, or sleep. You may struggle with any uncertainty ahead, and your responses will no doubt be shaped by the treatment plan, your own experiences of illness, and other stresses already present in your life.

As a partner you may also find yourself managing medical appointments, household tasks, finances, childcare, alongside offering emotional support - even though you may not see yourself as a "carer".

It takes a lot to navigate all the cancer treatments and appointments. Your contributions are incredibly valuable and will really help your partner and family through this time. It's normal to just want to 'fix' everything, and it's often unclear how to help. Offers of support from others may fluctuate and you may find yourself carrying a lot of the load at times.

Adjustment takes time for you, your partner, and both of you as a couple.

There are many strategies to help yourself and your partner navigate this new and uncertain experience, and bringing an open mind and flexible approach will be invaluable.



DISCLAIMER This information offers general suggestions only; always consult your doctor on matters that affect your health. All care was taken to ensure accuracy at the time of distribution. For urgent assistance for yourself or someone else please contact your GP, Lifeline 13 11 14 or 000.

LEARNING TOGETHER There's no single "right" way to cope, and no one-size-fits-all approach to supporting someone you love through cancer. What matters is finding what works for you and your partner, and being open to learning and adjusting together. The following suggestions have been guided by the experiences of other partners and couples so you know you are not alone in your experience and aim to validate what you are doing as well as help you feel prepared.

1. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT THIS IS A BIG DEAL - FOR BOTH OF YOU

Cancer is a major life stressor, and treatment may last months or even years. Watching someone you love go through cancer can be incredibly hard and you can feel pretty helpless. Taking care of yourself is one of the most important things you can do, not just for your own wellbeing, but for your partner and any family members who may rely on you. Think of the oxygen mask analogy on a plane: you need to put your own mask on before you can help others. Keep up exercise, hobbies, and regular check-ins with your GP, and consider learning stress management or relaxation skills if these are new to you. Find simple, low-cost ways to recharge: a coffee in the sun, time in nature, good book or online game.

3. LEARN ABOUT COMMON EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Cancer can bring a wide range of emotions - fear, sadness, anger, anxiety, grief - and they may fluctuate daily. It's common to worry about how both you and your partner will cope, so educate yourself with resources such as the Cancer Council's "Emotions and Cancer" and "Caring for Someone with Cancer." Pushing positivity may shut down honest sharing, and it's important to watch for signs of distress in yourself or your partner - poor sleep, loss of appetite, irritability, low motivation, or physical symptoms such as headaches, tension, drinking more or using other unhelpful strategies. Help can include counselling, peer support, e-health tools, or short-term medication, so reach out early to your GP, cancer team, Cancer Council (13 11 20), or services like HeadwayHealth. Urgent assistance is available from Beyond Blue (1300 224 636), Lifeline (13 11 14), or by calling 000.

2. TRY TO UNDERSTAND YOUR PARTNERS' EXPERIENCE

Your partner may not always show how they're feeling (or even know) and we all have different comfort levels with emotions. They might also be trying to protect you. Your partner's road is unique, so ask gently and listen carefully. You might say, "It's not surprising you're feeling like that," or "I can hear you're really tired", and reflect back what you hear: "So you're saying it's better if I let you rest?". If you're unsure how to respond - let them know or ask: "What's most helpful when you feel this way?" so your partner can guide you. Conveying empathy with simple statements like "I'm sorry it's so hard today" may feel small, but lets your partner know you have heard them; rushing in to cheer them up won't always make them feel better, and sometimes, just sitting may be enough.

4. FIND OUT WHAT SUPPORT IS NEEDED

Ask your partner - rather than assume. You could use a 1-10 scale to check in on their energy, mood, or pain, to guide you in what help may be needed and expectations for the day. Offer practical suggestions and take action where helpful; outsourcing tasks can preserve energy for quality time together. Think of energy like fuel - if you only have half a tank, where will you spend it? If you're hosting visitors, you may have nothing left for each other so together prioritise what matters most.



5. RESIST THE URGE TO TAKE CONTROL

You want to help but let your partner guide what they need - cancer involves many losses, and maintaining roles and routines in life may help your partner feel more like themselves. Ask how involved they want you to be in their appointments and health care decisions, and keep checking in as this may change over time.

6. PLAN YOUR COMMUNICATION

Plan together and ahead of time who needs to know what, how and when, and what boundaries to set. You don't owe anyone details and if you're not ready to share, be politely assertive as needed. You may also need a strategy for communicating with your care team. You and your partner may not agree on how to talk to children or all decisions, so consider seeking input through professional guidance.

7. ACCEPT SUPPORT

Accepting help can be hard, but can ease the load and models healthy behaviour to younger family members. Plan with your partner what can be delegated and who you're comfortable accepting support from. Please remember, if you say "no" too often, people stop asking. Try "thanks so much - we'll need help down the track, so please ask again," or "the doctors have said this is a long haul - so we are working on a list". The phrase "it takes a village" may ring true, so please see HeadwayHealth's tip sheet on "Accepting Offers of Support".