

# Communication



“It was a really tough time for my wife, right after I was diagnosed. We were pretty sure that I’d be okay, but I wanted to talk to Kerry about what would happen if things didn’t work out as we hoped because we hadn’t talked much about that. I think she talked to her friends about it, but I wanted her to talk to me more.”

**Isaac**

**Diagnosed with prostate cancer**

## How does this affect me?

Talking to those who are close to you can help you face the challenge of dealing with cancer. Good communication can help you gain the support you need, understand others’ concerns, and make you feel less isolated. Often, people hesitate to talk about sensitive issues because they don’t want others to feel uncomfortable or worried. This is normal – it can be scary to talk about things that you are not used to talking about or that scare you. Don’t be afraid to express your feelings and thoughts with those around you – you don’t have to do it perfectly and sometimes communication simply involves a gesture or touch. Rather than remaining silent and experiencing feelings of loneliness, fear, and anxiety, try talking with others. Good communication can help you strengthen your relationships with those close to you.

Communication becomes much easier when you use the tools found in the section [What can I do to make it easier to communicate?](#)

Some examples of difficult conversations you might worry about:

- Sharing your diagnosis with a friend or family member
- Talking about your treatment plan with your child
- Asking for help at work.



## **What can I do to make it easier to communicate?**

Knowing how or when to begin a difficult conversation isn't always easy. While it can be difficult to approach sensitive topics, open communication helps avoid misunderstandings and feelings of frustration. Here are some suggestions that may help you get started.



### **Tip #1: Collecting your thoughts**

Make a list of the things you want to discuss. For example:

- The news of your initial diagnosis
- Your symptoms
- Your treatment plan
- Your appointments and transportation
- Help you might need
- Fears about the future
- Changes in family or work responsibilities
- Your living will and wishes
- Finances

Pick one topic to focus on. For example, a change in your family responsibilities.

- Who will you talk to about this? E.g. Your partner, your children
- How does this topic make you feel? E.g. “ I feel nervous to talk about changes in family responsibilities because I don’t want others to see me as a burden.”  
Being honest can help you feel more understood and allow others to share their feelings more openly.

Prioritize

- It is okay to have a long list of topics you want to discuss but pick the one that is most important to you right now. Choose which topic you want to address first.
- Write it down – this will help organize your thoughts and keep you focused on the topic.



**Tip #2: Sitting down to have a difficult conversation with your partner, children, parents or friends.**

Those closest to you may have many questions for you. They will likely want to share their feelings and thoughts but may not know when to approach you or if they should bring up their questions. It is important to work as a team and make efforts to have open communication with the people you trust, they are there to help and support each other.

- Pick a time that works for you and your loved one.
- Share the topic you would like to discuss with your loved one. They may have another topic they want to talk about. Try to stick to one or two topics at most so you do not become overwhelmed with the conversation.
- Turn off or mute your electronics.
- Share your feelings from when you collected your thoughts (see previous section). For example, “It makes me nervous to talk about this because...”
- Listen attentively to the others and make eye contact with them. Some silent moments are ok- your loved one may need time to process new information or think about what you are saying before responding.
- Take a break when necessary. You do not have to talk about everything all at once.



### **Tip #3: Special considerations when talking with children and teenagers**

- Children and teenagers can often sense when something is wrong. It is important to talk to them and give them opportunities to express their feelings. Speaking to your children about your diagnosis can be difficult. You may wish to speak with a social worker or health care professional for support or guidance.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

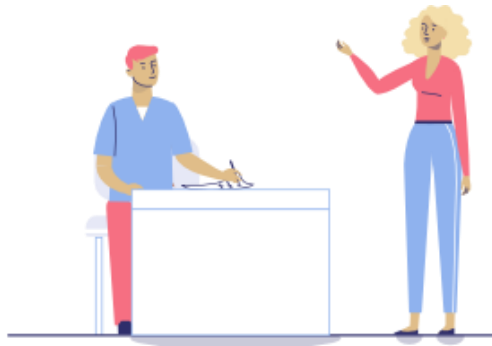
- Use words appropriate for your child's age. Briefly tell them what the illness is called, what part of your body is affected, and what will be done to treat it.
- Encourage them to share their concerns and feelings.
- Remind them how much you love them.
- Reassure them it is not their fault that you are sick because young kids sometimes think they are to blame for a parent's illness.
- Do not force the conversation if they do not want to talk. They will approach you when they feel ready.
- Tell them it is okay to ask questions and to share their feelings. Let them know you don't have all the answers but (you) can share information with them when you have it. You can also ask them if they would like to talk to a counselor.
- Invite your teenager to attend a medical appointment with you if they wish to (if allowed by your clinic).
- Tell them it is okay to share their feelings with their friends if they want but it is always best to get information about your diagnosis and treatment plan from you.



#### **Tip #4: Having a difficult conversation with friends, colleagues, and others**

Talking to your friends, neighbours, and those in your wider social circle may pose different challenges. For example, you may need to talk to your boss or colleagues about changes in your work schedule due to your healthcare appointments. Or you may be unsure of how to answer questions from your coworkers or friends when they ask you how you are doing. Here are some considerations when approaching these conversations :

- Use open and direct communication to clarify expectations, express your needs, and share your feelings.
- You can choose what to share and what not to share.
- Some conversations may seem awkward. When that's the case, do not be afraid to say, "I know talking about this may feel uncomfortable, but thank you for having this conversation with me."
- Some people might ask you to let them know if there is anything you need. Do not be shy to ask for a drive to an appointment or for an afternoon of childcare if this may be helpful to you.



## What help do I need?

### **Make a list**

Keep a diary or notebook with a list of

- What you want to talk about
- Who you want/need to talk to
- Resources you want to contact for help (e.g. counselor, family therapist, your healthcare provider)
- Write down helpful referrals and tips you might receive

### **Find a “contact person” if you can**

This is a friend or family member who will pass on health updates to others. This can allow you to focus on other things while providing your loved ones with information. This person can monitor or return calls or emails, plan times for others to visit you, or send a group update when necessary.



## Where can I find help?



### **Your family and friends**

- Your family may help you by giving you some tips and ideas on how to make tough conversations easier.
- Ask your family and friends to write down what they want to talk about or the questions they have. This can help you organize your thoughts and find answers as a team.



### **Your healthcare team**

- Your emotional support and wellbeing are part of your healthcare. If you think you need it, don't hesitate to ask for a referral to a mental health professional such as a psychologist or social worker to help you with the challenges you are facing.
- Your healthcare team can help facilitate family meetings and help discuss topics such as treatment options or changes you need to make.



### ••• Other supports

- Support groups can provide information and resources for people going through similar experiences. These can be in person, group settings, via phone, or online. Talking to others who share a similar experience can help you find coping strategies.
- The Canadian Cancer Society offers a free program that matches people dealing with cancer with trained volunteers who have had a similar cancer experience. They are there to listen, offer hope, and support with the challenges you may be facing. Check out [match.cancer.ca](https://www.match.cancer.ca) or call 1-888-939-3333.
- Explore trustworthy online communities for people with cancer (e.g. Cancer Support Group on Facebook or [CancerConnection.ca](https://www.CancerConnection.ca)) and ask for feedback on your specific challenges.
- Quebec Cancer Foundation: The Foundation provides a [resource directory](#) where you can search for the organizations near you offering a variety of services including home help, lodging, transportation, and other supportive resources.

For more information see [Getting support](#).

### What can I do to look after myself?

When you share your concerns, thoughts, and plans with the people around you, it shows others that you are looking after yourself and seeking the help you need. You can also perform self-care activities that can make you feel better which will allow you to better communicate.



## **Eat well**

Eating healthy food and ensuring you drink plenty of fluids can help your body feel better.

- Try to eat a whole and balanced diet. This includes consuming plenty of vegetables, fruits, protein, and whole grains.
- Consult your healthcare professional or dietician for help in meal planning and to check if there are any foods you should not eat.
- Reach out to your doctor if you are having trouble eating due to nausea or vomiting.
- Drink plenty of liquids so you don't get dehydrated.
- For more information see [Looking After Yourself](#).



## **Move your body**

Exercise can help strengthen your body and help you clear your mind.

- Choose an activity you like to do either alone or with a family member or friend.
- Walking, light stretching, or breathing exercises can help your body, mind, and brain feel better.
- In general, light exercise can be done while you are undergoing treatment but check with your healthcare provider before starting any new exercise.
- For more information see [Looking After Yourself](#).



### Practice relaxation strategies

Taking care of yourself by finding ways to relax can help your mind and body. This can lead to better sleep. These easy relaxation strategies can be done anywhere!

- Breathing exercises such as slow, deep breathing. Even a few minutes of deep breathing can help your body relax.
- Progressive muscle relaxation. This involves tensing and relaxing a muscle, or groups of muscles, one at a time.
- Guided imagery or visualization. Imagine being in a place that makes you feel calm in real life. You can use a recording to guide your visualization or find help from a trained instructor.
- Massage therapy. Use a certified massage therapist who has experience working with cancer patients. You may inquire if you have insurance cover or contact local community organization for references.
- For more information see [Relaxation Strategies](#).

## Resources

For more information on communicating with others and other helpful resources, check out the resources below.

[Canadian Cancer Society – Coping when you have cancer](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Talking about cancer](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Talking to children about cancer](#)

[BC Cancer – Family Support](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Family life and cancer](#)

[Canadian Cancer Society – Feeling your best during and after treatment](#)

## Acknowledgement of sources

The content of this document has been adapted from the following sources:

- Canadian Cancer Society. Coping when you have cancer. 2019.
- Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of Canada. Talking with family, friends, and children. 2020.
- BC Cancer. Talking with your children about a cancer diagnosis. 2018.
- BC Cancer. Talking with your teen about a cancer diagnosis. 2018.
- TEMPO. Supporting Each Other. Talking about the hard stuff. 2018.
- TEMPO. Supporting Each Other. Different talking styles. 2018.
- TEMPO. Supporting Each Other. Helping each other feel better. 2018.

## Healthcare professional endorsement

The content of this document has been reviewed and approved by a team of healthcare professionals and clinical experts.

## **Disclaimer**

Please note that this fact sheet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare professional. If you have questions about your health, or any medical issue, you should contact a healthcare professional right away. You should not delay seeking medical advice, or disregard professional medical advice, because of information in this fact sheet. Before beginning any health treatment, always consult your doctor. All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained in this document is accurate at the time of publication. e-IMPAQc is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of, or related to, any use of the fact sheet, or because of any errors or omissions.

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