

Maintaining healthy relationships during COVID-19

Relationships are facing ongoing changes and unprecedented stress during this time of COVID-19. Anxiety, fear and social distancing may be bringing new challenges to relationships. You are trying to control as much as you can, making sure your loved ones are safe, taking care of yourself during treatment, eating well and getting as much rest as possible. You may be burdened with unwanted thoughts of financial concern, what if my loved one gets sick? What if COVID-19 impacts on my cancer treatment and recovery?

On top of this you may find yourself spending more time at home with your loved ones- yes love is meant to be 24/7 365 days of the year, but usually not all at once!...

COVID-19 unleashes fundamental human fears that at other times we adaptively protect ourselves from with the illusion of control, the illusion of permanence and the comfort of social connection. Being diagnosed with cancer these fear can be exacerbated further.

Going through cancer treatment requires patients to be in lockdown, cocooning, staying at home and staying safe. It is important to take proactive and practical steps in keeping relationship as healthy as possible in this time where cabin fever and the sense of claustrophobia creeps into the homes, lives and relationships with those you love.

So how can you maintain healthy relationships during COVID-19?

1. Communication is key

Communication has become even more important now that we find ourselves in confined spaces and spending more time with others. Talk to each other, communicate your frustrations, fears and sadness. How can we do this in a way that does not add to what is already an anxious stressful time?

You may want to consider the following:

- Set time aside with your partner to talk about what is going on for you and in your relationship.
- Think about what you would like to say, before sitting down with your partner. This way you can formulate the message clearly and concisely.
- Always consider your tone of voice and what message it is sending to your partner.
- During the conversation check in with your partner to ensure that he/she really understands what you are saying. By doing so you will limit any unwanted feelings of not being heard.
- Consider the use of "I" statements such as "I feel", "I want", "I need"
- Communication is ongoing, not just a once off conversation.
- Remember communication is not only about what is worrying you (perhaps your cancer treatment or COVID19), it can also be about things that are going well in the relationship. An opportunity to show appreciation and build a stronger unity.

2. Remember what worked (and didn't) before COVID-19:

Remember what worked in your relationship before COVID-19. Draw on your strengths of the "whole" relationship and what each of you bring to the relationship. It might be helpful to consider how you dealt with previous difficult situations.

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- Remind yourself, and your partner, what your strengths are. Keep in mind that a partnership is made up of two people, with each person bringing their own strengths and communication styles to the relationship. Allow the time and space for each person to use their strength for the best of the relationship.
- Remind yourselves about the fun things you did together. That is before cancer and COVID-19. Examples may be cooking a meal together or watching a movie on a Friday evening.
- Continue doing what works! Make each other laugh and most importantly be kind to each other. You may consider doing one act of kindness for each other each day for example making a cup of tea, putting on your partner's favourite music.

3. It is ok to take time for yourself:

Your loved one may be overly protective and worried about you at this time and you are finding this a little too much. In times of crisis it is important to take time for yourself – taking time for yourself entails physically removing yourself from the space that you and your partner share. This time will allow you to check in with your feelings, give you time to reconnect and reflect on what is going on for you. If physical space is limited, consider demarcating a space in the living room or going into the bathroom and taking a bath. Find a space where you can be alone with your thoughts, breath and reconnect.

You may find this useful link to relaxation and visualisation exercises when taking time for yourself:

<https://www.stlukesnetwork.ie/patients/patient-support/relaxation.html>

No matter what your living space allows, communication within this space is key. Let your partner know when you need the space, and to remember that he/she may also need to take time for themselves.

4. Managing tensions

During times of COVID-19 we find that tensions are running higher in many spheres of our lives. Our stress and tension around the vulnerability of having a cancer diagnosis has increased twofold. Increased tensions can also be as a result of changes in routine, living “on top” of each other or the perceived loss of freedom. You may notice that your loved one is managing this challenging situation differently to you and you both don't seem to be on the same page anymore. You may find yourself being quick to snap at your partner or vice versa. Managing tension is challenging under any circumstance and living in a world of COVID-19 and cancer adds extra tension.

Here are a few ideas on how tension in relationships can be managed:

- If you have noticed changes in your partners behaviour, consider their mood i.e. what triggers have occurred. Try not to take on or internalise their behaviour.



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- If your partner explains their behaviour, trust that their explanation is true. Avoid trying to “get inside their head”. We are all living in a stressful world, no one is perfect, and we need to be responsible for our own behaviour.
- Partners of patients diagnosed with cancer are (naturally) anxious that their loved one remain safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their anxieties, about your well-being, may be unconsciously projected onto you in many ways, for example: snapping answers, avoiding talking about their fears or being more quiet than usual. Try and consider that their intention is good, even if shown in a different way.
- Negotiation is important in managing challenges. If the challenge is not that important, try exploring the challenge, if no consensus is reached, consider letting the issue go or agree to disagree. It is alright not to be right all the time.

5. You are in this together

Right now, it may feel like this COVID-19 crisis is going to be around for ever. The uncertainty, the fear and even the frustration of our perceived lack of freedom feels like it is continuously creeping in on our lives and our relationships. We must remember that this too will pass, and when it does, our relationships will still be there. Remember our actions and behaviours will have an impact on our relationships long after COVID-19 crisis is over. You are in this together.

If you and your partner are feeling you are not coping with your cancer diagnosis and the impact of COVID-19 you are not alone.

Please advise your medical team and request a referral onto the Psycho-oncology department in SLRON.

We provide, one to one and couples counselling sessions.