



coping together

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR COUPLES FACING CANCER

SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

The challenges addressed in this booklet...

- I just don't know how to make my partner feel better
 - I'm having trouble talking to my partner
 - I don't know how to talk about the 'hard stuff'
 - I feel less connected to my partner
 - I don't know how to solve our problems
- I'm stressed by the changes in my roles and responsibilities
 - I'm finding it harder to deal with conflict

Note to reader

This booklet is not intended as a substitute for consultation with your health care professionals. Patients or partners with health care questions should call or see their health care professional promptly and should not disregard professional medical advice, or delay seeking it, because of information encountered in this booklet. Before commencing any health treatment, always consult your doctor.

All care has been taken to ensure that the information contained here is accurate at the time of publication. All names of patients and partners have been replaced to protect their anonymity. ***Coping-Together*** is not responsible for any injury or damage to persons or property arising out of, or related to, any use of the booklets, or to any errors or omissions.

SUPPORTING EACH OTHER

The challenges that arise from a cancer diagnosis can present unique difficulties, which can shake your confidence in your ability to really be there for your partner, or make old problems in relationships worse. On the other hand, they may also present an opportunity to develop new and better ways to relate to each other.

If you find being there for each other is hard, or that your relationship is having ups and downs, this booklet may help. In it, we offer ways to enhance your communication, boost your connection, and deal with the tough times arising from a cancer diagnosis.

Meet the experts

Every **Coping-Together** booklet has sections where health care professionals have been invited to discuss the information and strategies that are presented. Each expert is easy to identify – their picture is included next to their input, and you will recognise some of their faces from the **Coping-Together** DVD.

In this booklet, **Supporting Each Other**, our experts are Professor Brian Kelly, Dr Jemma Gilchrist and Associate Professor Jane Turner.



Professor Brian Kelly is Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Newcastle's School of Medicine and Public Health. He is also a Consultant Psychiatrist at the John Hunter Hospital, Newcastle. He has a long standing interest in the psychosocial aspects of oncology and palliative care; both in research and in his clinical practice.

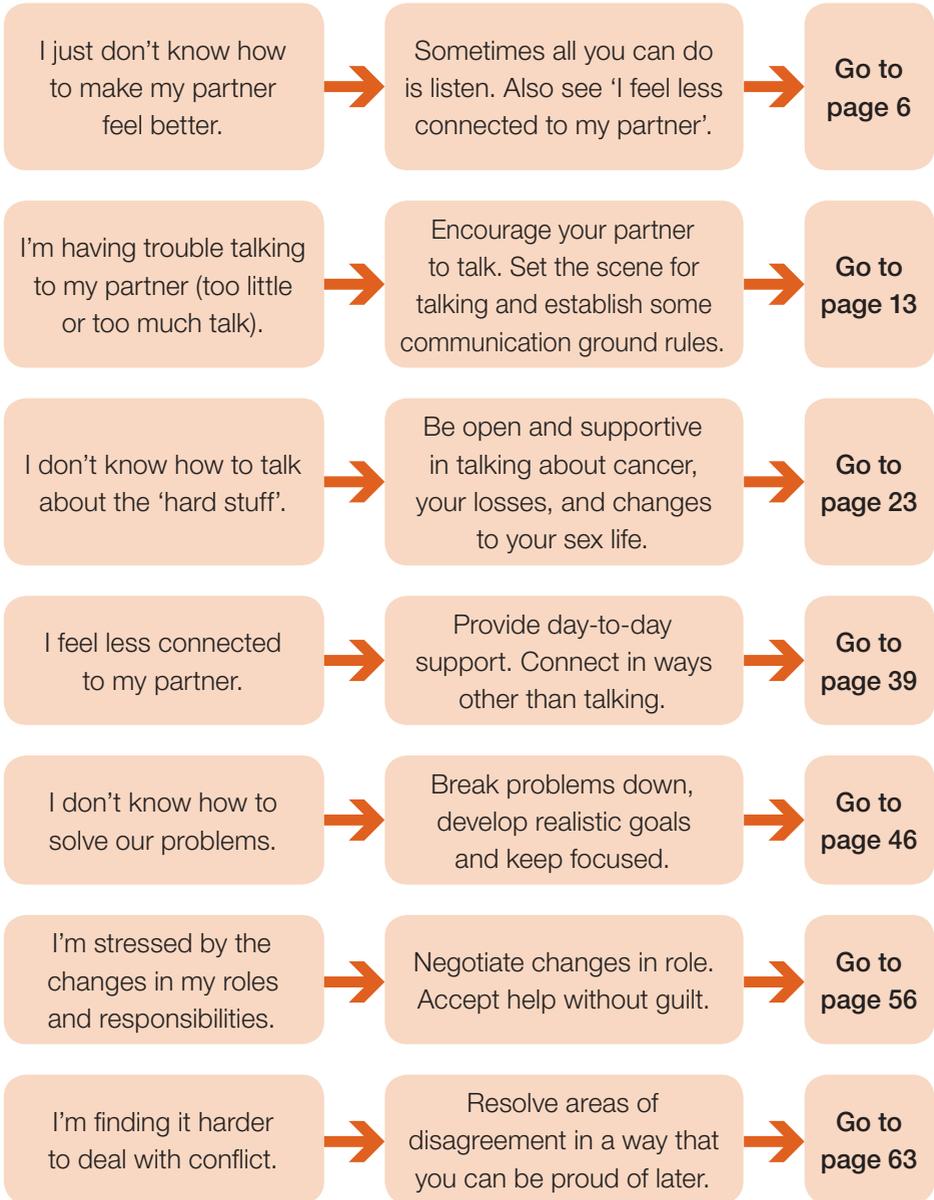


Dr Jemma Gilchrist is a Senior Clinical Psychologist who specialises in the psychological care of individuals and families coping with cancer. She has experience in educating health professionals on psychological needs in cancer care and is actively involved in research to develop new ways of treating cancer-related fears and concerns.



Associate Professor Jane Turner has worked as a Consultation Liaison Psychiatrist in oncology for over 20 years. She has extensive experience in the design and delivery of health professional education, and has taken an active role in the development of consumer resources and a number of educational initiatives for people affected by cancer and their families.

The following flowchart shows some common concerns couples have when trying to support each other. Navigate your way through the chart until you recognise your own concern and choose the strategies recommended on the right. Go to the relevant pages for more detailed information.



I just don't know how to make my partner feel better

👂👂 Well I told her that the mastectomy didn't matter and that set her right off. What I meant was that I was okay with it and loved her just the same. But I know now what she really needed was for me to listen and not try to reassure her. 🗣️🗣️

Rajesh, husband of Shari, diagnosed with breast cancer.

👂👂 I've always liked to fix things; I fix cars for a living. But I can't fix Janice. How can I just sit there and listen and not do anything else? 🗣️🗣️

Stephen, husband of Janice, diagnosed with melanoma.

👂👂 It's like you want to come up with answers to make your wife feel better, but you're not sure you have them. That has been quite stressful. 🗣️🗣️

Kevin, husband of Rita, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

There may be nothing you can say or do to make your partner feel better. You may not be able to 'fix' their feelings, and sometimes *just listening* to your partner can be exactly what they need. Listening can be challenging, especially if you're stressed yourself. Included in this section are some suggestions that can help you show your partner that you're listening.

Suggestions to show your partner that you're listening

1. Use your **body**.
2. Use **listening skills**.
3. Try to **imagine** how they're **feeling**.
4. **Avoid roadblocks** to listening well.



Suggestion 1: Use your body

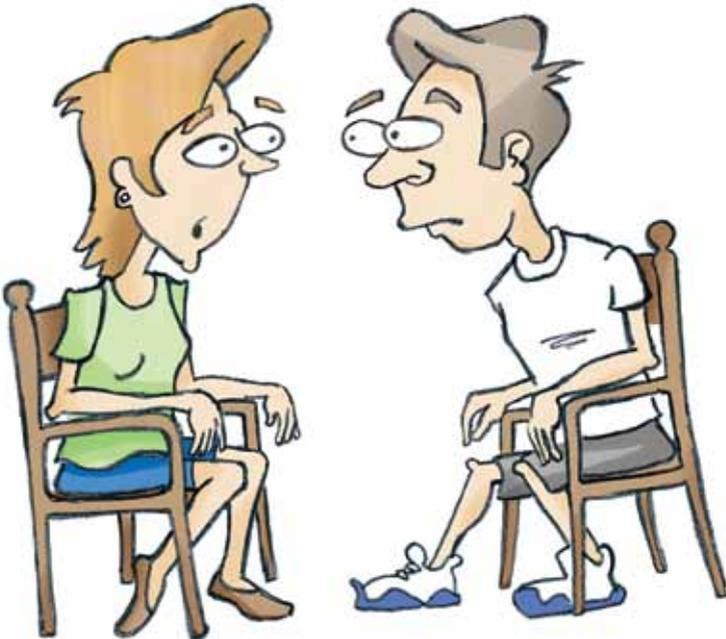
FACT: Body language is estimated to account for 93% of communication (55% bodily features such as eye contact and 38% vocal features such as tone and speed).



Try these body language tips to show that you're listening:

- ✓ Make and maintain eye contact.
- ✓ Make and maintain a relaxed and open body posture (e.g. arms not crossed, hands relaxed and not in fists).
- ✓ Turn your body towards your partner.
- ✓ Nod your head from time to time.

How long should we maintain eye contact?



Suggestion 2: Use listening skills

Use **encouraging statements** to keep the conversation flowing.

"Mmmm, hmm"

"Sounds like you have some ideas on this."

"Tell me more about that."

Short phrases

show your interest.

"I see."

"What happened next?"

"I'm not sure I understand. What do you mean by that?"

"I heard you say..."

Repeat back what your partner has said.

"If I've got this right, you said..."

Asking questions

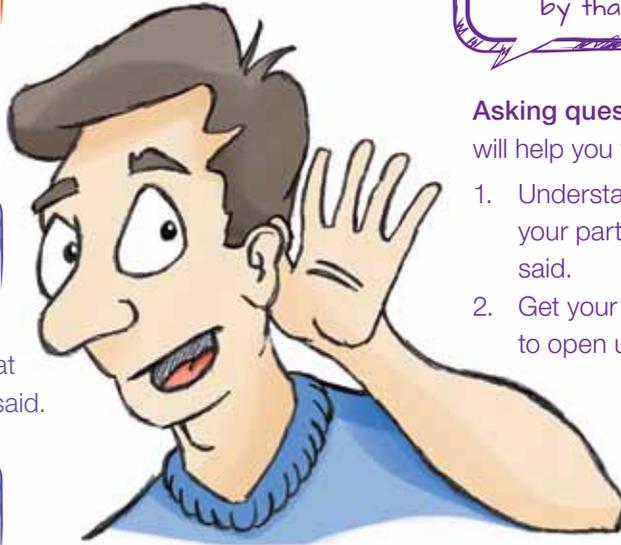
will help you to:

1. Understand what your partner has said.
2. Get your partner to open up.

"That makes sense to me."

"I can see how, when I come home late, you'd get worried, because something might have happened to me."

Validate what your partner tells you even if you don't agree – this lets them know that you've heard and understood their point of view.



Top Tip: Use drive-through listening

Think about the interaction that takes place when you order something from a drive-through – you state what you want, and the employee repeats it back to you to confirm they have heard you correctly. You can do the same thing with your partner.



Suggestion 3: Try to imagine how they're feeling

Nothing tells your partner more clearly that you've really been listening to them than using what they've told you and imagining how they're feeling. You need to immerse yourself in your partner's world to try to understand where they're at, why they're thinking certain things, and how they're likely to feel.

Say something like:

- ✓ "I imagine that you might feel... (anxious and uneasy)."
- ✓ "Sounds like you're feeling (overwhelmed and frustrated) at the moment."

Top Tip: Don't worry if you get the feelings wrong

Your partner will be able to see that you're trying and it may encourage them to tell you plainly how they're feeling. So, don't be put off if your partner says "No, I'm feeling stressed, not angry"; at least you're talking openly and really trying to understand.



Sometimes it's hard to know the right words to describe our feelings. To help you out, we've supplied a list of emotions that you might recognise in yourself or your partner.

Feelings list

A	Distracted	I	P	T
Abandoned	Distraught	Ignored	Pained	Tenacious
Agitated	E	Intimidated	Peaceful	Tense
Agony	Eager	Isolated	Petrified	Tentative
Angry	Embarrassed	J	Pleased	Terrible
Anguished	Empty	Jealous	Proud	Terrified
Annoyed	Energetic	Joyful	R	Threatened
Anxious	Exasperated	Jumpy	Rage	Tired
B	Exhausted	K	Refreshed	Trapped
Bad	F	Keen	Relaxed	Troubled
Betrayed	Fearful	Kind	Relieved	U
Bitter	Flustered	L	Restless	Ugly
Bored	Foolish	Left out	S	Uneasy
Brave	Frantic	Lonely	Sad	Unmotivated
C	Free	Loving	Safe	Unsettled
Calm	Frightened	M	Satisfied	V
Capable	G	Mad	Scared	Vehement
Challenged	Glad	Miserable	Sceptical	Vital
Cheerful	Grief	N	Settled	Vulnerable
Confident	Guilty	Needy	Silly	W
Confused	H	Nervous	Sorry	Weak
Crushed	Happy	Nice	Strange	Wicked
D	Hateful	O	Stunned	Wonderful
Delighted	Helpless	Odd	Suffering	Worried
Determined	Hesitant	Optimistic	Sure	
Despair	Hurt	Outraged		
Discouraged		Overwhelmed		

Suggestion 4: Avoid roadblocks to listening well

Avoid the common 'roadblocks' that get in the way of listening to your partner.

Common roadblocks to listening well

- ✗ Interrupting.
- ✗ Not making eye contact.
- ✗ Focusing your eyes and attention on something else (such as a newspaper or TV program).
- ✗ Sighing.
- ✗ Using facial expressions that show boredom or annoyance.
- ✗ Facing your body away from the person talking to you.
- ✗ Giving advice, making suggestions or providing solutions.
- ✗ Persuading, arguing or lecturing.
- ✗ Preaching, or telling others what they 'should' do.
- ✗ Disagreeing, judging, criticising or blaming.
- ✗ Shaming or ridiculing.
- ✗ Withdrawing, distracting or changing the subject.
- ✗ 'Making light' of a serious topic.

Adapted from Gordon (1970).

ROADBLOCK! Keep your eye out for this sign throughout this booklet – it identifies common problems that stop issues from being addressed.



What others say about listening

👂👂 My wife helped me so much by listening to me. It felt like a boost of moral support. 🗣️🗣️

Benito, diagnosed with melanoma.

👂👂 I really felt like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders when I was able to just blurt it all out without Rajesh rushing to reassure me and cheer me up. 🗣️🗣️

Shari, diagnosed with breast cancer.

Why listening can help – What the experts have to say

Listening to your partner shows him/her that you care, are interested in what they're going through, support them, and think their thoughts and feelings are important. It also gives your partner a chance to say what's on his/her mind. Going over problems in our heads tends to be a bit like pinball, our mind ricocheting from one worry to another. The process of talking about problems compels us to put all these thoughts in some kind of order, so that we can communicate them to someone else. This can help thoughts to make more sense, put things into perspective, uncover new options and give the listener the opportunity to offer support.



– Dr Jemma Gilchrist

Key Points: Just listen

1. The best way to help your partner might be to simply listen.
2. Make sure your body language communicates to your partner that you want to hear what they're saying.
3. Use listening skills, like repeating what your partner has said, to show that you're really trying to understand.
4. Try to pick up and reflect back the feelings your partner is expressing.



I'm having trouble talking to my partner (too little or too much talk)

👂👂 I'm not a great listener and not much of a talker either; I guess I'm more the 'strong and silent' type, and Debbie is just the opposite. She wants to talk all the time and I don't, because I'm worried about saying the wrong thing. I mean, what's the right thing to say? I was afraid of how badly I could stuff things up. 🗨️🗨️

Rob, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

👂👂 It got to the point when I would say to my partner, 'Just stop! Stop doing the laundry, stop doing the dishes. I just want you to talk with me right now'. Don't get me wrong; he was so helpful and I loved it, but a lot of the time, that wasn't what I wanted most. Luckily, he'd stop sometimes and realise, 'If I just talk to her, she'll feel much better'. 🗨️🗨️

Emma, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

Many couples report changes in their communication patterns and preferences after a cancer diagnosis. Beforehand, you may have been happy for your partner not to tell you much about what they were thinking or feeling. Now, you might find it really important to you that they share with you more. Some people find talking helps to reduce their worries and tension, while others find going over and over a topic is frustrating and makes them feel helpless.

Included in this section are suggestions that might help you open up with your partner, while also respecting that your partner may not want or need to talk as much as you.

Suggestions for talking with your partner

1. **Set the scene** for talking.
2. Establish **ground rules** for talking and use the **XYZ approach**.



Suggestion 1: Set the scene for talking

Talking to each other can be difficult if you're not prepared. There are a number of things you can do to make it easier for your partner to talk with you.

Before you start talking...	
Strategy	Why this helps
Think 'we' instead of 'me'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It shows a commitment to your relationship and respect for your partner.• It considers your partner's needs.
Commit to helping conversations start and end well.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• People often avoid conversations because they think they'll go badly.• Being open to talk, and ensuring that your partner feels heard at the end will encourage them to try to talk with you again in the future.
Think through what you want to talk about.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It helps you get to the point when you start talking.• It clarifies how important this issue is for you.
Practise what you want to say aloud to yourself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It helps you identify the possible tone of your message.• It helps you clarify exactly what you want to say.• It can help you choose words that your partner might be more receptive to.
Write down your concerns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It provides perspective and gives you a chance to look at the whole issue.• It can help to organise your thoughts.
Consider timing and environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Having a suitable space and time to raise concerns helps ensure that they can be fully discussed.• Ideally, make sure you have ample time, privacy and no distractions.• Some times of the day are better for discussions than others. For example, when you're busy trying to get kids fed and to bed, or when your partner has just returned home, are probably not ideal.

Before you start talking...

Strategy	Why this helps
Consider your feelings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Checking your feelings will help you decide whether now is the right time for the conversation.• If you're feeling very angry or emotional, take some time to think about how you're going to start the conversation. Delay it, if need be.
Consider your state of mind.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If you're under the influence of alcohol, drugs or medications, talking can be unproductive – you're more likely to say things you'll regret later.

Often, when couples have different desires for talking, they find themselves in a cycle of **pursuit and withdrawal**. Pursuit and withdrawal, when it comes to communication, is when one partner pushes to discuss an issue (the pursuer) and the other avoids it (the withdrawer). Generally, when pursuers push more, withdrawers avoid more; as withdrawers avoid more, pursuers push harder – it becomes a vicious circle. It takes both of you to change the pursuit and withdrawal pattern. Consider which role you've played in recent attempts to communicate with your partner.



Top Tip for 'pursuers':

Choose your battles – pursue only those issues that are most important to you.

Top Tip for 'withdrawers':

Deal more directly with what your partner wants by actually talking with them.



Many people find it hard to express themselves, especially when they're feeling emotional. Consider the following strategies to try to keep conversations going.

While you're talking...	
Strategy	Why this helps
Try to speak in small chunks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limit what you want to say to three sentences at a time. This will make it much easier for you both to have an opportunity to talk.
Avoid repeating yourself.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This increases the likelihood of you both having a chance to talk.• It reduces frustration; your partner won't need to say "I heard you the first time".• Repeat only if your partner doesn't understand.
Use 'I' statements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Beginning your sentences with "I" keeps the focus on what you're thinking and feeling.• Your comments sound less like criticisms or attacks on your partner.
Avoid blaming your partner.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Complaining about your situation is fine; however, blaming your partner for your situation is likely to make them defensive and stop fruitful conversation.• Avoiding blame keeps the conversation respectful and on track. For example, instead of saying "I'm really tired and you're not helping enough around the house", say "We agreed that you'd help me clean the house more. I'm really upset by this."

While you're talking...

Strategy	Why this helps
Be clear about what you need or what you want changed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It increases the likelihood of you getting what you want.• It sounds less like an accusation or attack.• It's respectful. For example, try "Could you please change Emily's nappy and give her a bottle?", instead of "Would you take care of the baby for a change?".
Continue to check your emotions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Checking your feelings every now and then will help you decide whether now is the right time to continue the conversation.• If you're feeling very angry or emotional, take some time to think about how this might impact on what you say and how you say it.• You may need to ask for a break to get yourself calm.• Allowing your partner some time out will encourage them to return to the conversation as they'll know you're respecting their feelings.

Source: Gottman and Silver (1999).

Top Tip: Remember to praise your partner

If you've asked your partner to do or change something in a previous conversation, acknowledge their efforts when they actually do it. Part of positive communication is showing appreciation. It also encourages your partner to be more open to future conversations.



Suggestion 2: Establish ground rules for talking and use the XYZ approach

Sometimes people don't want to start conversations because they believe their partner will just keep talking about the issue. Alternatively, some people are reluctant to start conversations because they think their partner won't open up, or will think their concern is silly. Setting some ground rules can help each of you speak your mind, make it easier to listen and enhance participation in conversations. We've provided a list of ground rules for you to consider. Have a look at the list together and discuss which ground rules you think would help you enhance your conversations. Feel free to come up with and discuss other ground rules that suit you as a couple.

Ground rules for talking:

- Either partner** can suggest an issue.

- Either of us can say **“This isn't a good time for me”**. The partner who says this is then responsible for setting up a time to talk (e.g. within the next 24 hours, after I finish this task).

- Set a time limit** (e.g. 10 minutes, no longer than 30 minutes). This may help to keep you focused and can encourage reluctant partners to participate, as they know the conversation has a set end point.

- Avoid blaming and generalising** – Try to avoid the use of phrases such as “you always” and “you never”. These phrases are typically wrong and can make your partner defensive or withdrawn.

- One issue only** – This keeps you focused on the important issue and increases the likelihood that you'll see it through to a resolution.

- Consider all viewpoints** – You may not agree, but you can acknowledge the other person's view and consider how this understanding could change how you interact or deal with the problem.

- Focus on now** – Bringing things up from the past is a sure way to make your partner defensive or frustrated. Even if this issue has happened many times before, focus on how it makes you feel now and what you need done about it this time.

- We will be clear and direct** – Tell each other exactly what you’re thinking/feeling, and what you would like to be different.

- No interruptions** – Interrupting can make your partner feel disrespected.

- Remember to **come up with your own ground rules**.

Adapted from Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer, and Farrugia (2006).

Even with good intentions, some topics you raise with your partner are likely to sound like criticisms. A simple way to raise such issues is to use the XYZ approach.

What is XYZ?

It’s a three step communication strategy that identifies the situation (in situation **X**), the behaviour (when you do **Y**) and the consequence (I feel **Z**).

	 The Situation	 The Behaviour	 The Consequence
Rebecca	“When you agree to attend an appointment ...”	“...and then you cancel at the last minute...”	“...it makes me feel disappointed and that I’m not important to you.”
Devon	“When the kids come to visit and they offer to help ...”	“...but you say we’re okay and refuse to let them help...”	“...I feel frustrated and like you don’t see how much pressure I’m under to get everything done.”
Emmett	“Sometimes, when I hear you crying at night ...”	“...and I try to hold you but you push me away...”	“...I feel excluded and that you don’t need me.”

Top Tips: What to do if you or your partner say things that aren't helpful



As the speaker

- ✓ Watch your partner's body language. If they react in a way that doesn't seem to fit with your intention, it may be that you haven't quite got the words right.
- ✓ Ask for a 'do-over'. Say you can tell you have upset them and that this was not your intention. Ask "Can we try this again?"
- ✓ If your partner indicates you can try again, think about what you really want to say, and try some of the strategies outlined earlier (e.g. using 'I' statements, XYZ, avoid blaming your partner).



As the listener

- ✓ Try not to overreact, after all, your partner is trying to communicate.
- ✓ Tell your partner that what they've said has, for example, upset you or made you angry.
- ✓ Reflect back what you've heard and clarify if that's what they really mean. For example, "I think you're telling me... is that what you meant to say?"
- ✓ Consider their body language. Does it match their message? (e.g. if you think they have said something hostile, do they also have a scowl on their face, a raised voice, folded arms or clenched fists?) If their body language is relaxed and open, chances are they've just got the words wrong.

ROADBLOCK! Be willing to let your partner start again. Don't hold their initial attempt against them as it will stop the two of you working through the issue.



What others say about the benefits of talking

👂 Sandra thought I was angry with her or blaming her when I was first diagnosed. I just wouldn't talk and I'd get annoyed when she was at me all the time to talk. I was only just keeping myself together and, yeah, she was pissing me off a bit. I thought I'd just lose it if I told her how I felt. But things just got so much better when I finally told her what was going on in my head. 🗣️

Jacob, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

👂 It's a funny thing. I thought I was protecting her by not talking about my concerns. But when we talked, I realised I was kidding myself thinking she wasn't worrying too. Now that I don't have to spend energy trying to hide how I feel, things are less tense. 🗣️

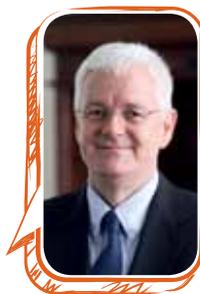
Ivan, husband of Catarina, diagnosed with breast cancer.

Why talking can help – What the experts have to say

For couples facing cancer, partnerships based on strong communication tend to experience less distress and greater relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, relationships in which both partners avoid talking, or one partner demands communication while the other withdraws, tend to experience higher distress.

A lack of communication quite simply leads to uncertainty about how your partner is feeling and what they're thinking. This creates strain in relationships and couples can feel like they've lost their connection. Open communication; however, can improve your quality of life while making you feel important, less isolated and better able to cope with the demands of the cancer experience.

– Professor Brian Kelly

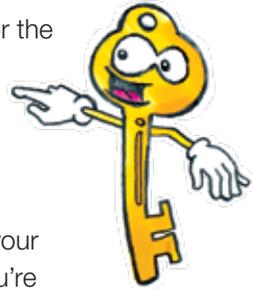


FACT: Partner support is usually rated as more important than support received from other people. So, your partner may be talking to other people about their situation, but that doesn't mean they don't need to talk about issues with YOU.



Key Points: Talking with your partner

1. Talking with your partner is an important way for the two of you to stay connected.
2. Setting the scene for talking, and creating some communication ground rules, can make talking with each other easier.
3. Your emotions will influence how you talk with your partner. It's important to let them know how you're feeling, but don't let your emotions get in the way of the message you want to send.
4. There will be times when you don't want to talk, but rather than refuse to talk, reschedule it for another time.



I don't know how to talk about the 'hard stuff'

👂👂 It was a really tough time for my wife, too, right after I was diagnosed. We were pretty sure that I'd be okay, but I wanted to talk to Kerry about 'what if I'm not okay?' We hadn't talked much about that. I think she talked to her friends about it, but I would have liked it if she'd talked to me more. 🗣️🗣️

Isaac, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

👂👂 We've had a really hard time talking about the sexual side of our relationship. I still find Tang as attractive as she was when we first met, but she is convinced that I think of her differently now [since mastectomy]. 🗣️🗣️

Kuan, husband of Tang, diagnosed with breast cancer.

There's no denying that cancer will create change in your relationship and routine and couples may find that they want to talk about issues they wouldn't have raised previously. This section focuses on addressing issues relating to talking about **cancer, grief and loss**, and **sexual issues**.

Often couples avoid talking about these issues, because they don't want to upset each other. The intention is good, but a failure to talk about very sensitive concerns can be detrimental to your wellbeing.

Suggestions for talking about cancer, loss and sexual issues

1. **Acknowledge** that there's an issue to discuss, and **be open** and **supportive** in your communication and actions.
2. **Deal with silence** and the emotions that arise.
3. Consider **other support options**.
4. **Support each other** when talking with children, family and friends.



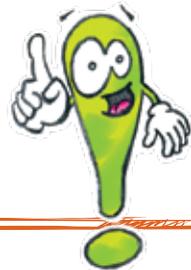
Why people AVOID talking about sensitive issues

- Makes them feel anxious or sad.
- Feel inadequate or unable to help.
- Want to avoid burdening or making their partner feel guilty.
- Afraid that the topic will upset their partner or lead to an argument.
- Fearful of saying the wrong thing.
- Want to avoid appearing needy or vulnerable.
- Concerned that their partner may not see their point of view/ understand their concern.
- Denying it all – just longing for it to all go away.
- Feel that talking about it is futile because it won't change the situation.
- Feel that they're protecting their partner by not voicing their concerns.

Why people NEED TO talk about sensitive issues

- Your partner won't know exactly what you need, want or feel unless you tell them.
- Not talking with your partner about important issues can create feelings of resentment, hostility and isolation.
- Helps to relieve stress.
- To give and receive emotional support.
- To address issues together.
- To give and receive supportive suggestions or develop a plan for how to cope with the situation.
- You increase opportunities to feel loved, understood, accepted and supported.
- You feel less exhausted if you don't have to adopt a 'happy facade'.

Top Tip: As uncomfortable as it might be, make sure you're honest when talking about sensitive topics (e.g. cancer, grief and loss, sex). Telling your partner what you think they want to hear will not help you understand each other better.



Suggestion 1: Acknowledge that there's an issue to discuss, and be open and supportive in your communication and actions

The first step is for both partners to recognise and acknowledge that something needs to be discussed. It may take some time to even realise that there's an issue bothering you. Try to pin-point exactly what the issue is and how you feel about it. The more specific you can be with yourself, the easier it will be to express the problem to your partner.

If your partner feels there's an issue to discuss and you don't agree, try to be open to their suggestion anyway. It's perfectly natural for some issues to be more important to your partner than they are to you.

Top Tip: It's very common for people to feel they have to 'put on a brave face', adopt a positive outlook and pretend everything is okay. While hope is important, you and your partner may also be feeling worried and afraid. Try to acknowledge this and create opportunities to talk about the positive and negative aspects of what you're facing.



They did tell us to be prepared to talk about the hard stuff!

The second step is to raise the issue with your partner. When talking about sensitive concerns, consider using the following strategies:

- Prepare** for your conversation. Consider your feelings and thoughts on the topic, and what you want in relation to the issue.

- Use your **listening skills** and remember how your **body language** contributes to the communication.

- Use **“I” statements** and the **XYZ** approach to keep the conversation focused on how you are affected by the issue.

- Use communication **ground rules** and **work hard at keeping the conversation going**.

- Try a **gentle approach** to get the conversation started. For example, say “I would really like to start talking about how things have changed between us physically” rather than stating “you never touch me anymore.”

- Be especially mindful that you **don’t blame your partner**, or sound like you are. Consider these examples:

Ineffective strategy: *“You can’t even say the word cancer, let alone help me figure out what I’m meant to do.”*

Effective strategy: “When I try to talk to you about cancer and you shut down, it makes me feel like I have to go through this on my own.”

Ineffective strategy: *“I know that you blame me for all the medical bills coming in; I think you’d prefer it if I just stopped having treatment.”*

Effective strategy: “I’ve got the impression that you’re worried about our finances; we’ve had a lot of medical bills to pay. Can we talk about it?”

- Don’t demand change.** Consider these examples:

Ineffective strategy: *“We simply have to have sex soon. I can’t stand the frustration!”*

Effective strategy: “I really miss our sex life. Let’s talk about what’s getting in the way of our being close.”

Ineffective strategy: “*You’re sad and moping all the time. The doctors said this is treatable, so stop thinking about the negatives.*”

Effective strategy: “Even though the doctor thinks you’ll get through this, it seems to be really weighing on you. I’m not sure what to say or do to help you, but I want you to know that I care.”

- Show you care and **offer your support**. Let your partner know you’re concerned for them (e.g. “I’m sorry to hear that you’re feeling that way”) and that you want to help (e.g. “I want to help, what can I do?”).
- Avoid platitudes and false reassurances**. The key to this is simply imagining being in your partner’s shoes. “*It sounds to me like you’re feeling miserable*” rather than assuring them that everything is going to be okay.
- Avoid giving advice**. Unless they ask for it, don’t tell your partner how you think they should be coping.

Adapted from BC Cancer Agency (2006).

Top Tip: The ‘*I’m having trouble talking with my partner*’ and the ‘*I just don’t know how to make my partner feel better*’ sections in this booklet contain lots of strategies to help you discuss sensitive issues.



FACT: Research has shown when partners hide their worries from each other, distress can *increase*. Partners who openly communicate with each other experience less distress overall, even if it’s upsetting at the time. It’s a case of ‘*short-term pain for long-term gain*’.



Why should I talk about cancer when it won't change anything?

Some people feel that there's no point talking about cancer with their partner; after all, they aren't doctors, they don't have answers and they can't fix anything. Talking about cancer with your partner can really help because:



- ✓ Cancer might be making them feel vulnerable and isolated. Talking to them can help reduce these negative feelings.
- ✓ Talking about what's happening for someone, especially with the person they value most, can make people feel safe and connected.
- ✓ It helps to avoid assumptions and misunderstandings. Your partner might assume that you don't care if you don't talk.
- ✓ It shows your partner that you care and support them.
- ✓ Talking about what might happen can help to prepare you both for events when they do happen.
- ✓ It can reduce your partner's sense of fear and worry.

Top Tip: You and your partner won't always feel the same way. For example, you might be optimistic about the future, while your partner may be frightened. Talk about these differences and respect your partner's feelings. Remember ***there's no right or wrong way to feel.***



Suggestion 2: Deal with silence and the emotions that arise

When you raise sensitive issues, especially for the first time, you might find that there are long silences in your conversation. Don't despair and don't assume you must 'fill the silence' by talking.

Silence can be a sign of several things. It may be that you or your partner:

- ✓ Has raised a topic that the other had not considered – so they need time to think about it.
- ✓ Is trying to figure out what to say.
- ✓ Has raised a topic that the other isn't sure how to deal with.
- ✓ Is giving the other a chance to keep talking.

If you find silence too uncomfortable, consider asking a direct question to get things moving, such as "What are you thinking about?" or "How does what I just said make you feel?"

What if I just don't want to talk about this stuff?

Some people just don't want to talk about cancer. If this is the case, it's important to remember that your partner might have different needs, and they may really want you to discuss things with them. Refusing to talk to your partner may make them feel that you're withdrawing from, or abandoning them, and that you don't see their needs as important.



When your partner tries to get you to talk about sensitive concerns:

- ✓ Be honest with them. Tell them that this is a difficult topic for you to discuss.
- ✓ Let them know there may be a limit to how much you're willing to share on the topic.
- ✓ Encourage them to express their concerns, and take on the role of listener (see the '***I just don't know how to make my partner feel better***' section in this booklet).
- ✓ Let them know that if things change and you want to talk about these issues, you will raise them.

What do I do if my partner becomes upset?

If your partner starts to cry:

- ✓ Don't panic. Tears won't harm either of you.
- ✓ Resist the temptation to stop them crying.
- ✓ Try to accept that the most helpful thing you can probably do is just be there and continue to listen.
- ✓ Touch or hug your partner, if it seems appropriate and they allow you to.
- ✓ Try to accept that crying is a way of relieving tension and getting things out in the open.
- ✓ Avoid platitudes and false reassurances. Saying "don't be silly, everything is going to be all right" may sound dismissive and make your partner think you don't understand them.
- ✓ Sometimes silence is the best option. If you're unsure what to say it can be best to say nothing. Just make sure that your body language indicates you're there for your partner (e.g. holding hands, moving closer to them).
- ✓ Don't assume they're crying because of something you did or said – they are dealing with a lot at the moment and their tears might have nothing to do with you.
- ✓ If you don't entirely understand why your partner's crying, wait until their tears have stopped and gently ask them.



What do I do if my partner becomes angry?

If your partner becomes angry:

Be mindful that you have feelings too and the right to safety. Don't let your desire to be supportive to your partner get in the way of being safe, so try the following suggestions only if you're not being intimidated, threatened or harmed.

- ✓ Be determined to remain calm and respectful, even if your partner is not doing this. Take a few deep breaths and remember that you can only control *your* reactions.
- ✓ Focus your attention on what your partner is trying to say. Look for why they are behaving this way, rather than focusing on the behaviour.

- ✓ Let them know that you're listening by using the skills we included in the **'I just don't know how to make my partner feel better'** section of this booklet. Encourage your partner to talk rather than telling them to "relax" or "calm down".
- ✓ Keep an open body stance:
 - Keep your palms open, facing upwards. This conveys peace and welcomes conversation.
 - Angle your body slightly away from your partner so you don't look like you're confronting them.
- ✓ Speak slowly in a soft, neutral tone and keep your comments brief. Lengthy comments can provide opportunities for arguments.

– **Dr Jemma Gilchrist**

Top Tip: If it feels appropriate, use humour when you talk about sensitive issues, as it can help to diffuse the tension surrounding the issue. For example, one husband, when asked if he was having sex with his wife (diagnosed with breast cancer), replied "We are having oral sex, that is, we are talking about it".

Source: Silver (2004).



Suggestion 3: Consider other support options

While you're working through challenges consider whether there are other strategies and support providers that could assist you. Below are some options you might want to consider.

Look after yourself

When you're facing sensitive concerns, you might feel anxious, depressed or want to withdraw. Looking after yourself may start to take low priority as you feel your energy and motivation start to wane. Looking after yourself is exactly what you need to do. Make sure you are:

- ✓ Eating well.
- ✓ Getting regular exercise.
- ✓ Getting adequate sleep.
- ✓ Doing activities that you enjoy, to give yourself a break.

See the ***Dealing with Stress and Worry*** booklet for more information on coping with stress, worries and sadness.

Consider external support

You can get extra assistance by:

- ✓ Asking your GP for a referral to a psychologist.
- ✓ Calling the Cancer Council Helpline and/or using the Cancer Connect service on 13 11 20.
- ✓ Calling Lifeline for confidential, anonymous counselling on 13 11 14.
- ✓ Contacting ASSERT (Australian Society of Sex Educators, Researchers and Therapists). Visit www.assertnational.org.au or call 02 9280 0151 to find a therapist near you.
- ✓ Contacting a local support group. While it might feel uncomfortable at first, research has shown that talking about difficulties with others in similar situations can provide couples with a sense of relief that they're not alone.

See the ***Getting the Support You Need*** booklet for more information about finding and accessing support services.

Talk to your health care team

Talking to members of your health care team about sensitive issues may seem daunting and embarrassing, but they may also have important information that can help you.

Who should I talk to? The health care professionals who will be most able to help with sensitive concerns are:

- ✓ Psychologist
- ✓ Psychiatrist
- ✓ Social Worker
- ✓ Cancer Care Coordinator
- ✓ GP/Specialist

Consider asking them the following questions:

- How common is this issue?

- What are the possible reasons for this issue?

- How long does this issue typically last?

- What can we do medically to resolve this?

- What else can we try to resolve this issue?

- Can you recommend a professional who can help us with this issue?

- Can you recommend any books or websites where we can learn more about this issue?

See the ***Getting What You Need From Your Health Care Team*** booklet for additional strategies for communicating with your health care team.

Suggestion 4: Support each other when talking with children, family and friends

Talking to other people about cancer or other sensitive concerns can be stressful. You may be worried about how they'll react and unsure how to start those difficult conversations.

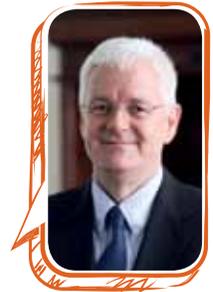
As a couple, it might help to consider:

- ✓ How you expect someone to react. This may help plan what you'll say and where you'll tell them.
- ✓ Whether you will talk to family members and friends together or individually.
- ✓ If there's a particular person you're concerned about talking to, ask if your partner can take the lead in that conversation.
- ✓ If there's another family member or friend who could act as a communication contact point, so that the two of you don't need to have the same conversation again and again.

Talking with your children/grandchildren about cancer

While it can be a big challenge, it's better to talk to children honestly about cancer, rather than letting them imagine the worst. Kids tend to know when something is wrong, so it's much better to let them have the facts, explained in a way they can understand, by adults they trust.

Here are some ideas about what and how to communicate with children of varying ages about cancer.



– Professor Brian Kelly

Tip for talking	Explanation/Example	Age (years)			
		2-5	6-9	10-12	13+
Use the word 'cancer'.	They will hear the word somewhere at some time, and it may evoke fears and worries if they don't understand it.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Teach them about cancer.	Let them know that cancer is an illness and that the doctors involved will give good care and treatment. If the prognosis is good, tell them that the doctors feel they can treat the cancer well.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Answer their questions honestly.	Use words that they can understand and tell them when you don't know the answer. Be prepared for them to ask the same questions again and again.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reassure them that they didn't cause the cancer.	"Nothing you said, did or thought caused this."	✓	✓	✓	✓
Reassure them that it doesn't mean that they'll get cancer.	"You can't catch cancer from someone else." "Just because someone in our family has cancer, it doesn't mean that anyone else in our family will get it; even when they're older."	✓	✓	✓	✓
Be clear that they can't influence the cancer.	"You can't make Dad better; only the doctors can try to do that. You can do things to make him feel a bit better though, like drawing him a nice picture..."	✓	✓	✓	✓
Show acceptance of their feelings and the feelings of people around them.	"I imagine that you might feel sad, upset, scared or angry about Mum being unwell, and that's okay. You'll hopefully feel happy too at times and that's good. It's okay to feel all sorts of things at the moment." "Some people might act a bit differently around you because they're worried about you and our family. That's okay; they're just not sure what to do."	✓	✓	✓	✓

Tip for talking	Explanation/Example	Age (years)			
		2-5	6-9	10-12	13+
Be prepared to discuss concerns about death.	Reassure them that having cancer doesn't mean that you're dying, but that if dying does become a possibility, you'll let them know. Reassure them that no matter what happens, they'll be loved and taken care of. "Sometimes people do die from cancer, but there's a good chance I'll get better. I'm taking strong medicine and have good doctors to help me."	✓	✓	✓	✓
Avoid making promises that can't be kept.	Remind them that their loved one is being well cared for and that you hope for recovery.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Plan to talk for only a short time	Be mindful that young children can only pay attention for short periods of time.	✓	✓		
Let them set the pace for how long you talk.	Older children will probably have more complex thoughts to discuss.			✓	✓
Be clear and simple.	Try to use as few words as possible to explain what's happening, perhaps use pictures for young children.	✓	✓	✓	
Give more specific information about cancer.	Go into a bit more detail about the cancer and treatment, such as explaining there's a lump in your body that needs to be removed.			✓	✓
Tell them how their routine will change.	Over the next day. Over the next few days. Over the next few weeks and months.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Discuss how their life will be impacted.	Be gentle but upfront about what might be expected of them during this time. They might have to do more around the house, have less access to transport or money for social activities.				✓

Tip for talking	Explanation/Example	Age (years)			
		2-5	6-9	10-12	13+
Be prepared for them to ignore or avoid topics.	When upset, scared or embarrassed, kids may steer away from certain topics. Don't insist on talking about it and let them know that you're there if they ever do want to discuss the topic.			✓	✓
Talk to their school teachers.	The school community can be a really important source of support for children. Let the relevant teachers know what's happening.	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tell them about helpful websites.	The National Breast Cancer Centre's website www.myparentscancer.com.au provides information on cancer, coping and grief, and explains medical terms. CanTeen's website, www.canteen.org.au , offers peer support for young people affected by cancer.				✓

Adapted from: Cancer Council NSW (2010); McCue (2012); National Breast Cancer Centre (2001); National Cancer Institute (2005).

What others say about the benefits of talking about sensitive issues

 We're still not all that comfortable talking about the 'hard stuff', but we'll get there with practise. What we most love to talk about is our progress. We spend a lot of time talking about how far we've come and congratulating ourselves. 

Shari, diagnosed with breast cancer.

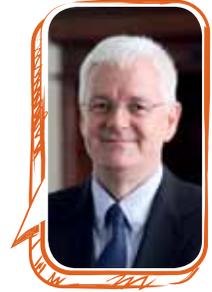
 Being able to talk about my experience was a huge need. It made me feel really good when my husband asked questions about my experience, my illness, and my fears. It was really therapeutic for me to relay what was going on. 

Jo-Anne, diagnosed with breast cancer.

Why talking about the sensitive issues can help – What the experts have to say

You can't support your partner to the best of your ability unless you communicate openly and honestly with them.

Talking is a way for you and your partner to understand each other, get issues into the open, gain the support you want and need, relieve stress and tension and feel heard and respected. Even if you don't know what to say, the value of being there and just listening can never be underestimated.



– **Professor Brian Kelly**

Key Points: Talking about the 'hard stuff'

1. Putting on a brave face and pretending everything's okay can create tension and a sense of disconnection between couples. Not talking can lead to misunderstandings, which then generates its own tension.
2. Sensitive issues can be difficult to discuss, but honest and supportive communication on such topics is vital.
3. Some people just don't want to talk about sensitive issues, but let your partner know that, rather than avoiding the topic completely.
4. Consider how the available support services could help you address sensitive issues within your relationship.



I feel less connected to my partner

 I had this feeling that I didn't know how to support Les, and that no matter what I did it wasn't right. I would try to reach out to him, but it always felt that he withdrew more and more. 

Martha, wife of Les, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

 I knew that she was struggling with everything, but I felt like she was shutting me out, wouldn't let me in to help her. It was pretty lonely. 

Bert, husband of Zara, diagnosed with breast cancer.

Couples facing cancer often feel like there is distance between them

One of the reasons couples report a sense of disconnection is that cancer, rather than their relationship, takes centre stage in their lives. The challenge is to make sure the disease doesn't take over your world.

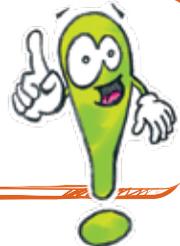
The suggestions in this section may help to enhance your relationship.

Suggestions for staying connected to your partner

1. Provide **everyday support**.
2. Participate in **activities together**.
3. Consider the **little things**.



Top Tip: Reassure your partner you're committed to them and your relationship. It can be important for them to know your support is steadfast, regardless of what occurs along the way.



Suggestion 1: Provide everyday support

Show an interest in the routine of your partner's life, such as their daily activities, hobbies and work.

Why is everyday support important?	How do I do it?	What should I avoid?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It lets your partner know you're interested in what they do.• It lets you know what's actually happening in your partner's life.• It helps you determine if your partner might need your help to pursue their interests.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Talk about your partner's day.• Show you're listening when they tell you about it (see the section '<i>I just don't know how to make my partner feel better</i>' in this booklet).• Ask questions about their activities, such as "Where did you and Olivia go for coffee today?"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tell your partner what they should have done with their day.• Make your partner feel like they need to defend their daily activities. 

Suggestion 2: Participate in activities together

Spending time together doing activities you find enjoyable is a great way to connect and take the emphasis off cancer. Think about:

- The activities you used to enjoy doing together before cancer, and
- Things you've always wanted to do together, but have never gotten around to.

If you or your partner are feeling too ill to participate in your usual activities, consider how the activities could be modified to fit your existing situation, e.g. if you enjoy going to the movies but don't feel up to it, rent a DVD to watch together at home.

Just say YES!

Try to be open to new experiences or spending some time together when your partner initiates it. You may have to change your plans, but it will communicate to your partner that spending time with them is important. You might also really enjoy it!



If, you're feeling too ill or tired, tell your partner that, **but**, reschedule their suggestion.

Suggestion 3: Do little things

Showing you care is more about doing little things to express your connection with your partner, and less about helping them deal with their everyday life, feelings and stress. Even so, these small gestures can reduce tension and steer the focus away from cancer.

Do you really think
3D glasses can bring
more depth to our
relationship?



Read the lists below for some ideas to show you care.

AT HOME

- Make tea or coffee.
- Do a crossword or read the paper together.
- Do the washing and ironing.
- Cook your partner's favourite meal.
- Run a bath.
- Ask your partner to dance in the living room.
- Do some gardening together.
- Tidy up around the house.
- Wash the dishes.
- Call if you will be late home.



SOCIAL SCENE

- Go out for dinner.
- Be actively involved in planning something fun to do.
- Go to the movies/hire a DVD.
- Invite your partner's closest friend/family member over as a surprise.
- Go see a comedian.
- Reunite at the end of each day to talk about how it went.
- Go on a drive.
- Walk the dog together.
- Play a board or card game.
- Make a coffee date.

FOR EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL INTIMACY

- Share a secret.
- Make a point of hugging or kissing hello and goodbye.
- Hug, kiss or caress.
- Forgive your partner for something they did/said.
- Give a compliment or praise.
- Write a love note and leave it somewhere they'll find it.
- Light candles at dinner time.
- Ask your partner how they feel.
- Call each other if you've been apart all day.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

- Maintain the car.
- Fix something around the house (or arrange for it to be done).
- Develop a budget together.
- Pay the bills.
- Talk together before making big purchases.
- Do the household errands.
- Deal with medical expenses, Medicare, health insurers etc.
- Deal with the daily mail.
- Learn how to use the internet together.

Adapted from Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer and Farrugia (2006); and Northrup and Duncan.

Exercise: *The little things*

Take a few minutes to think about the little things you'd like to do for your partner and what you'd like them to do for you. Perhaps write them down in the spaces below or on a piece of paper. Maybe your partner would like to do the same, and then you could exchange ideas.

AT HOME

SOCIAL SCENE



It's the little things that matter.

FOR EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL INTIMACY

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS

Top Tip: Research has found that happily married couples notice the small, positive things that their partners do for them. Teach yourself to notice small efforts, and let your partner know that you've recognised and appreciate what they're doing.



Keys to making the biggest impact with your caring acts:

- ✓ **Try new things.** You don't want your ideas to lose their novelty or become boring.
- ✓ **Pay attention** to your partner's reactions. What seems to mean the most to them? What works best to make them smile?
- ✓ **Pace yourself.** Don't do them all at once; spread them out throughout the week.

Source: Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer and Farrugia (2006).

Top Tip: If you're the partner with cancer, you might not have the energy for a 'grand gesture' to connect with your partner, so the little things are just right for you!



Have WE been diagnosed with cancer?

Some couples adopt the attitude that cancer is a 'we' disease, rather than seeing it as something only one partner has got. This attitude can enhance your connection and create a more supportive relationship.

Here are some things you can do to embrace this 'we' attitude:

- ✓ Attend appointments together.
- ✓ Learn about cancer and treatment options together.
- ✓ Learn to recognise signs of stress in your partner, and find a way to help reduce that stress.
- ✓ Discuss what types of support you might both need and develop a support plan around these ideas.
- ✓ Make important decisions together.
- ✓ Talk honestly about your feelings and needs.



What others say about strengthening your connection

👂 When I got bad stomach cramps in hospital, the only thing Mike [husband] could do was try to get me to think about anything that would help me forget about being in hospital. When I was all curled up on the hospital bed, Mike asked me if I wanted him to curl up with me and hold me tight, the way he does at home. I said 'Yes', hoping it would make both of us feel better. 🗣️

Margaret, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

👂 I found that I started to appreciate Matilda more. It brought us closer together, but changed our relationship too as we went through some good and not so good times. We made joint decisions, because they were going to affect us both. My wife was part of my journey with cancer; it was something we had in common. 🗣️

Kyle, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Why staying connected can help – What the experts have to say

The bond you share with your partner can make you feel safe and loved. When this bond is strong, couples can face cancer together, nurture each other, remain respectful towards each other and better deal with disagreements. When this bond is weakened, people can feel less satisfied and secure in their relationship.

– **Dr Jemma Gilchrist**



Key Points: Staying connected

1. Your sense of connection with your partner is very important.
2. Taking time regularly to show interest in what your partner has been doing, and spending time together, will reinforce your connection to each other.
3. Recognising that cancer is a disease that affects you both can help you feel like you're sharing the load together.



I don't know how to solve our problems

👂👂 I'll never forget the moment when I realised that my cancer diagnosis would mean that Jeff and I could not go on our holiday together. It had been our dream for so long and I felt so guilty. 📧📧

Christine, diagnosed with breast cancer.

When stressed by a problem, it can be hard to know what to do about it. It can be even harder to provide constructive help when your partner comes to you with a problem they'd like to solve. The temptation to take over and adopt the problem as your own can be great. Fortunately, there's a structured approach to problem solving you can follow to help uncover options and/or solutions.

Suggestion for solving problems

1. Use a **problem solving** process.



FACT: Solutions to problems can be action-based or emotional. Action-based solutions mean that you do something to directly address the problem. Emotion-based solutions mean that you change the way you think about or interpret the problem. A **good solution** may involve both action-based and emotional responses.



The following steps can help you think through and solve problems. You may already use some of these steps, but others may be new to you.

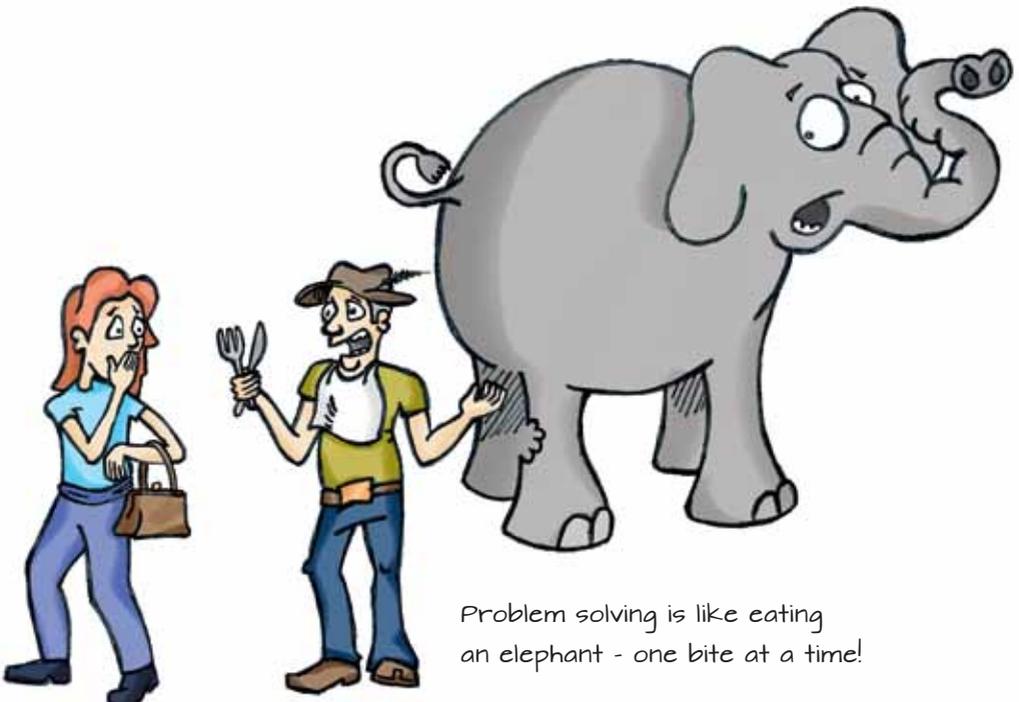


Read on for a problem solving scenario showing how each step can be addressed.

STEP 1: Identify the problem

Make a list of all your challenges. Sometimes defining the problem can prompt steps to a solution. Look at the problem in as many different ways as you can. Are other people affected? How does the problem look to your family, your friends, your doctors or your boss?

If the problem feels too big or overwhelming, **break it down into smaller ones.**



Scenario – Step 1

Jamie has had surgery for prostate cancer and has started radiotherapy. Jamie had planned to retire in the next 12 months, but shortly after his diagnosis, he decided to bring his retirement forward. His wife, Ava, is still working part-time. Jamie's struggling to adjust to retirement while dealing with the side effects of treatment, and feels uncomfortable with Ava being the breadwinner.

Jamie and Ava decide to try problem solving to address some issues relating to Jamie's change in role. They identify the main problem as: *"Jamie is having difficulty adjusting to retired life"*.

The problem identified by Jamie and Ava is vague – what does it really mean that he's 'having difficulty adjusting to retired life?' It's easier to solve specific, concrete problems rather than a vaguely worded one. Make the problem clearer by:



- ✓ Using specific and easily understood language to describe the problem?
- ✓ Asking your partner what they mean by the words they use to describe the problem.
- ✓ Identifying the key elements of the problem.
- ✓ Considering a specific example or time when the problem was present – what were the circumstances? How were you feeling?

Jamie and Ava realise this is a big problem that has a number of smaller problems, so they break it down into this list of challenges:

- ✓ Jamie feels dissatisfied with his retirement; he's unable to do some of the activities he expected to do in retirement because he's suffering from tiredness and incontinence.
- ✓ Jamie wants to take the road trip he and Ava planned, but is frustrated because he can't travel due to his treatment schedule and Ava's work commitments.
- ✓ Jamie feels that his decision to take early retirement was a mistake.

STEP 2: Prioritise your problems

First, list the concerns or challenges you've identified that need immediate attention, followed by those that can wait.

Scenario – Step 2

Jamie and Ava decide that the first problem they'll tackle is Jamie's dissatisfaction with his retirement and that he's unable to do some of the activities he expected to do in retirement because he's suffering from tiredness and incontinence.

STEP 3: Generate options

List all the available options for dealing with the most urgent problem. Identify as many solutions as possible and don't think too much about the worth of each idea. Think of how you've solved problems in the past. Use your creativity and don't restrict yourself.

Top Tip: **Quantity** can lead to **quality** when brainstorming solutions. Make a list of all your ideas – then think about how those ideas could be combined or modified.



Scenario – Step 3

Jamie and Ava brainstorm how they can address Jamie's dissatisfaction. They come up with the following list of options:

- ✓ Find strategies for dealing with fatigue and incontinence.
- ✓ Modify the activities Jamie wants to do so they're not as physically demanding.
- ✓ Find new activities to give Jamie a sense of purpose.
- ✓ Stop treatment.
- ✓ Try doing different activities at different times of day to make the most of Jamie's energy.

STEP 4: Consider all the consequences

Think about the positive and negative consequences of all possible options.

Questions to ask when evaluating the consequences of your options:

- ✓ What are this option's advantages? What are the disadvantages?
- ✓ Who will that option affect? How much time and effort will that option take?
- ✓ What are the short-term and long-term consequences of this option?

Scenario – Step 4

Jamie and Ava use the list of options they created at Step 3 and explored each idea's consequences. An extract from their problem solving plan is included here:

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
Find strategies for dealing with fatigue and incontinence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First step in addressing/reducing the treatment side effects.• Increases knowledge about the side effects.• Finding effective strategies could lead to a big improvement in Jamie's mood and quality of life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If he needs to talk to someone for ideas, it could be embarrassing to talk about incontinence.• Trying ineffective strategies could waste energy and time.
Modify the activities Jamie wants to do so they're not as physically demanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allows Jamie to do activities he enjoys.• Is a flexible way to deal with Jamie's health at any given time.• Allows Jamie to achieve goals he may have set himself for retirement, albeit on a different time frame.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May be frustrating and remind Jamie of what he's not able to do.• Some activities may not be modifiable.

ROADBLOCK! Take a break during the problem solving process. People can get stuck in a certain way of thinking which limits the solutions they generate. You do not have to solve a problem in one sitting!



STEP 5: Select the best option

Choose one possible solution. Make a choice and set a time limit to reach your goal. This option may not be your final solution, but it's the best available option.

Scenario – Step 5

Jamie and Ava decide that the best option from their list is to: “Modify the activities that Jamie wants to do so they’re not as physically demanding.”

STEP 6: Plan to put your best option into action

Put your chosen option into action by planning **what, how, who, how long and what if?**

Questions to consider when putting your best option into action:

- ✓ What needs to be done?
- ✓ How will you achieve this?
- ✓ What resources will you require?
- ✓ Who will be responsible for what?
- ✓ How much time is needed to implement the option?
- ✓ What will happen if unexpected difficulties arise?

Scenario – Step 6

Jamie and Ava plan how to put their chosen option into action.

Steps / resources required	Who	When
Make a list of activities that need to be changed.	Jamie	Over the next couple of days.
Discuss ways in which these activities can be changed.	Jamie Ava GP	After list is developed book our GP's next available appointment.
Purchase/obtain any resources needed to make the modifications possible.	Jamie Ava	Once the required modifications are decided.
Implement the modifications.	Jamie	Once modifications are identified and required resources obtained.

Example: Jamie takes great pride in his garden, joking that it's the envy of his neighbours. He typically uses hand shears to trim his hedges, but is finding this exhausting. He identifies this as a task that could be modified by using an electric hedger. Ava has a work colleague who she knows has a hedger, so she arranges to borrow that for a fortnight. Jamie also plans to split the task over several days, working in the morning when he has more energy.

STEP 7: Take action and evaluate outcome

You're now ready to put your plan into action. Once implemented, your plan should also be monitored and evaluated to determine if it achieves the outcome you expect and desire.

Not all problems have perfect solutions and some solutions may not work as anticipated. Just do your best and repeat the previous two steps as needed.

Top Tip: See the *Dealing with Stress and Worry* booklet for worksheets you can use for a problem you are facing.



What others say about problem solving

👍👍 Definitely the thing that helped me most was my partner being prepared to sit down and help me sort out any problems I've come up against. It wasn't easy to think clearly all the time. 🗨️🗨️

Danesh, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

👍👍 I really developed tunnel vision at one point. I was in a fair bit of pain, and so tired by chemo, but I just thought that was part of getting through cancer. Finally, Bill said he would talk to the doctor for me and that helped by getting some information. After that, we thought about other ways we could deal with my symptoms, and Bill was great at offering lots of suggestions. 🗨️🗨️

Raylene, diagnosed with breast cancer.

👍👍 Our financial situation was looking very scary, and I couldn't see any way out. I didn't want to mention it to Chloe because she had enough on her plate with her treatment and recovery. One day, she went to the shops to get groceries and the card was declined, so there was no hiding it any more. But, she was great, we sat down and talked about what we could do and came up with a plan. We sold some things we didn't use, and she borrowed some money from her uncle. Together we also tightened our budget. 🗨️🗨️

Thomas, partner of Chloe, diagnosed with breast cancer.

How problem solving can help – What the experts have to say



Because we solve problems every day, we usually don't think about how we actually do it. Cancer brings many new problems to deal with, so it's useful to think about different ways to approach problem solving.

Problem solving via the step-by-step process we suggest can help you:

- ✓ Work out exactly what you're trying to solve.
- ✓ Break down overwhelming problems into smaller, more solvable problems.
- ✓ Consider the resources and support you can draw upon.
- ✓ Provide a sound basis for important decision making.
- ✓ Feel in control of what you're facing, and less anxious about problems.

Couples who use effective problem solving strategies experience fewer cancer-related challenges and report lower levels of depression and anxiety. Effective problem solving also helps to increase quality of life and reduces the negative effects of cancer related stress for patients.

– **Associate Professor Jane Turner**

Key Points: Problem solving

1. Problem solving helps you identify the specific problem and develop a plan to address the issue.
2. Effective problem solving involves the generation of lots of possible solutions.
3. Problem solving also requires some evaluation of the plan to determine whether it's effective or another strategy needs to be tried.



I'm stressed by the changes in my roles and responsibilities

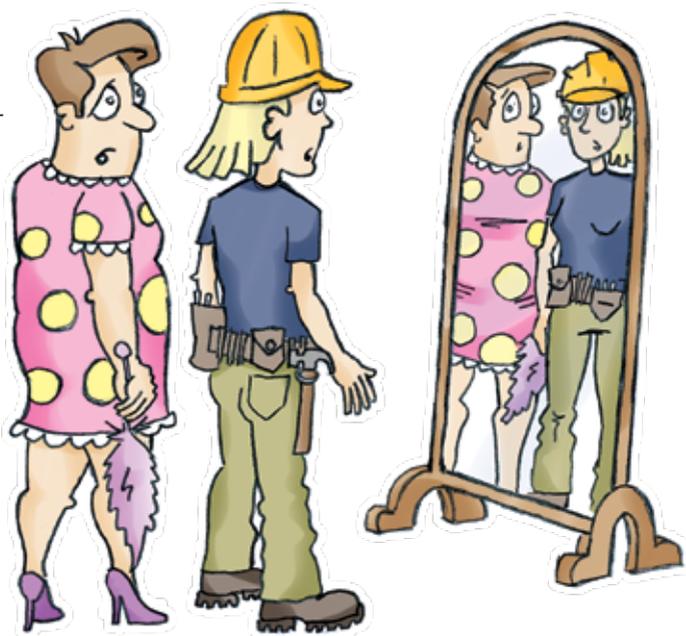
👂👂 I felt that I was going stir crazy, I just wanted to be able to do the things that I'd done before I got this. My family were so supportive and took care of everything but all I wanted was to be able to look after my home and my family. I was lost without that. 🛠️🛠️

Mavis, diagnosed with bowel cancer.

It can be difficult to adjust to changes in your abilities and responsibilities

Changes in your role can have both a physical and emotional impact. You may find yourself having to do things you've not done before, and that the demands on you have grown rapidly. Or, as the partner with cancer, treatment may mean you won't be able to do as much as you used to for a while. When roles and responsibilities change, the ways in which couples interact may also change.

I'm still not sure about the shoes.



Suggestions for managing changes to roles and responsibilities

1. **Negotiate changes in role.** Don't assume that your partner will automatically be able to see what needs to be done.
2. **Seek out** and **accept** offers of help.
3. **Re-evaluate roles and responsibilities** often.



Suggestion 1: Negotiate changes in role

Couples often successfully navigate their way through the changes that occur when there's a cancer diagnosis. The secret lies in accepting that some changes are inevitable, then planning to adjust to them. To help your planning, consider:

- ✓ Listing all the tasks that need to be done each day/week (the same list can be revised as needed in the future).
- ✓ Selecting the tasks that you feel able to take on.
- ✓ Talking openly about limitations that may prevent you from completing tasks (e.g. tiredness, pain, late appointments or meetings at work).
- ✓ Brainstorm ways to address these limitations together. Use the problem solving table from the **'I feel worried or uncertain'** section of the **Dealing with Stress and Worry** booklet.
- ✓ Take a closer look at the tasks that can't be completed:
 - Could they be modified to make them more achievable (e.g. rather than doing a big grocery shop, just pick up a few essential items that will get you through a few days; or could you shop on-line?)
 - Call in some help from family, friends and support services.

Top Tip: When your partner says they'll do a task, give them a chance to do it on their own, in their own way, and don't be critical if the result isn't perfect. Let them know that if they need help, you're happy to help, but try not to take over. This will give your partner a sense of control and accomplishment.



Suggestion 2: Seek out and accept offers of help

You've probably got quite a full plate and with extra things to do and fit in, it's easy to get overloaded. One way of avoiding this is to ask for and accept offers of help.

Your family and friends will probably want to help, but might not be sure how to go about it. Try the following:

- ✓ Be specific and direct about what you need (e.g. for the next two weeks we need someone to walk the dog).
- ✓ Don't make assumptions about who'll be willing to help and what sort of help they'll provide, people may surprise you.
- ✓ Prepare a list of tasks you are and aren't happy to have people help you with (e.g. lawn mowing and grocery shopping are fine, but doing laundry isn't).
- ✓ Ask family and friends how long they can provide the support for. Is it a one-time offer or are they willing to do something once a week for a couple of months?
- ✓ Consider the types of support you need now and potentially in the future. The table in the '**we need to know what support we have around us**' section in the **Getting the Support You Need** booklet might help.

Top Tip: Your role isn't to be 'everything to everybody', but rather to be the best 'you' that you can be. To achieve this you need to set reasonable expectations and limits on what you can accomplish from day to day.



Another useful strategy is to keep a note of offers for help. An easy way to do this is to get family and friends to complete a checklist like the one below.

Name:

Help I can offer:

- Mow lawns
 - A meal prepared [...] nights a week/ fortnight/ month
 - Help with forms and other paperwork
 - A shoulder to cry on
 - Grocery shopping
 - Babysitting
 - Respite for spouse/partner
 - Visit you in hospital
 - Help with washing/ironing
 - A regular ride (e.g. take children to school, take you shopping)
 - Communication contact point
 - A weekly phone call
 - Research information for you
 - Home maintenance
 - Run errands
 - Gardening
 - Pick up medications
 - Attend appointments
 - Clean the house
 - Take you out, do something social
-

Adapted from National Family Caregivers Association.

While help from family and friends is important, there may be times where a family member or friend becomes too involved or overbearing. This is a difficult situation because, while their intentions are good, their efforts are increasing your stress.

If this happens, be polite and direct. Tell them what you need and what you can tolerate. For example, *“I really appreciate everything you are doing for me, but I’m finding daily visits just too tiring. I’d love it if you’d come and visit maybe one or two mornings a week”*. Using XYZ communication and ‘I’ statements can also help, see the ***‘I’m having trouble talking with my partner’*** section in this booklet for more information.



Top Tip: There’s a big difference between doing and overdoing. To care for your partner, you need to care for yourself. Know your limits and rest when you need to. This rule applies to both partners in a couple.



Family and friends aren’t the only sources of extra help. When you’re clear about what help you need, find out whether there are services in your area that can assist. There are lots of ways to find out about local services, including:

- ✓ Asking your doctors, nurses or cancer care coordinators.
- ✓ Asking your social worker.
- ✓ Asking friends and family.
- ✓ Calling the Cancer Council on 13 11 20.
- ✓ Looking through the local phone book.
- ✓ Looking through the local newspaper.
- ✓ Searching the Internet.
- ✓ Visiting your local library.
- ✓ Contacting organisations that you know. Even if they don’t provide the service you need, they may know who does.

Top Tip: Investigate a variety of support services. Some are specific for cancer patients; however, you may be eligible to the many that are available to the general public.



Suggestion 3: Re-evaluate roles and responsibilities often

Your physical and emotional needs will change so you might want to discuss roles and responsibilities on a set basis (e.g. weekly) or when one of you notices that a need has changed. Remember, changes in roles and responsibilities can bring up a range of emotions such as frustration, sadness or guilt. These emotions can make conversations about roles and responsibilities problematic, so:

- ✓ Be polite and direct.
- ✓ Use 'I' statements (see the **'I'm finding it harder to deal with conflict'** section in this booklet).
- ✓ Focus on the help that you need, rather than what your partner isn't able to do.
- ✓ Approach it as a team.
- ✓ Factor in down-time for each of you.

What others say about role changes

 I was concerned Jeanette was doing too much and she got really upset with me. It was only when I really listened that I realised that for her to do some things in the house mattered, because she felt that she still had some control and was contributing to the family. Until I took that on board, I was just undermining her. 

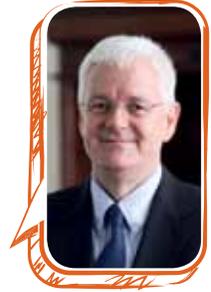
Tom, husband of Jeanette, diagnosed with breast cancer.

 Leearna tried to do everything for me, but in all honesty it started driving me nuts. So, I said, 'No, look, I've got to judge this for myself. I will ask you when I need help'. That seemed to calm her down and take some pressure off. There were things I needed help with, but I was surprised by how much I could still do. 

Carlos, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

Navigating changes in role – What the experts have to say

A willingness to discuss changes in roles and responsibilities indicates to your partner a commitment to them and your relationship, often at a time when they most need to feel supported. Being flexible in the roles you're willing to take on also makes compromise easier, which in turn may reduce role-related conflict.



In some cases, taking up new roles helps both partners feel that they've some control over the situation. The new division of roles and responsibilities can also provide a sense of accomplishment, and lessen guilt and anxiety. It's important that a suitable role is created for the partner with cancer, to avoid feelings such as guilt and dependency.

– **Professor Brian Kelly**

Key Points: Navigating changes in role

1. Changes in roles and responsibilities need to be negotiated through open and direct communication.
2. Negotiate changes in roles together, to ensure both partners have realistic workloads and meaningful roles.
3. Remember to recruit other sources of help, such as family, friends and external support agencies.
4. Roles and responsibilities need to be re-evaluated regularly as things change.



I'm finding it harder to deal with conflict

👂👂 It just seemed to me like we were butting heads all the time, about loads of little things. I felt that I could do nothing right. I really wanted to be there for Richard, but we both seemed to be so angry with each other all the time. 🗣️🗣️

Florence, wife of Richard, diagnosed with prostate cancer.

Sometimes the stress of it all makes it hard to get along

No matter how similar two people are in ideas and values, they won't agree on everything. Every couple experiences conflict, and with the additional pressures of cancer, it may be tougher to deal with this effectively.

It's easy for couples to lose their way when trying to settle disagreements, especially when discussing a 'hot topic'. Conversations that could be productive instead result in frustrated silence or yelling matches. ***The best way to resolve these situations is to learn a few tips about resolving conflict differently.***

Top Tip: Conflict resolution boils down to treating your partner as though they're a guest in your home. If a guest forgets their hat as they leave, people would tend to say "Here, you almost left your hat behind" as opposed to, "What's wrong with you? You're always forgetting things". We tend to show sensitivity and respect to guests. Keep this in mind as you consider the following suggestions.



Source: Gottman and Silver (1999).

How can we resolve conflict?

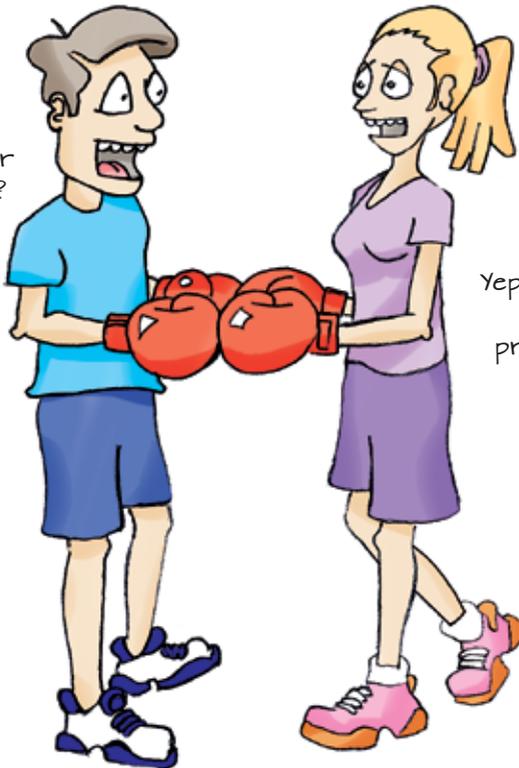
One popular approach to conflict resolution is to pay careful attention to what your partner is saying and to use what you hear to imagine yourself in your partner's shoes. You then communicate you're able to see the situation from their point of view. **If you can manage this approach, keep going.** Alternatively, try the following suggestions.

Suggestions for resolving conflict

1. Set and follow some **ground rules**.
2. **Address** the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse'.
3. Use **'I' statements**.
4. Follow the **steps for resolving conflict**.



So, you remember the rules?



Yep. Listen to each other. Solve the problem together. Don't use the boxing gloves.

Suggestion 1: Set and follow some ground rules for conflict resolution

Before you and your partner start talking through difficult topics, set some rules to help each of you speak your mind and make it easier to listen. Just like in the ***'I'm having trouble talking with my partner'*** section earlier in this booklet, we've provided a list of ground rules to consider, these ones particularly focus on conflict resolution, although some of the general conversation ground rules might also help.

Have a look at the list together and mark which ground rules you think would help you both to better manage conflict. Feel free to come up with and discuss other ground rules that suit you as a couple.

Ground rules for conflict resolution

- Either of us can say, ***"This isn't a good time for me"***. The partner who says this is then responsible for setting up a time to talk (e.g. within the next 24 hours, after I finish this task).

- Consider all viewpoints.** Listen to each other and try to find the best solutions to suit both partners. Try to accept each other's different opinions and flaws.

- Focus on now.** Bringing things up from the past is a sure way to make your partner defensive or frustrated. Even if this issue has happened many times before, focus on how this makes you feel NOW and what you need done about it this time.

- Address the 'sore spot'.** When under stress only focus on the immediate issue that is creating the tension/conflict. Agree to talk about the larger relationship issue later.

- Use problem solving** to stay focused on the topic under discussion (see the ***'I don't know how to solve our problems'*** section in this booklet).

- Call a brief 'stop'** if we start to become angry or upset. This means taking at least 20 minutes to calm down.

- Use safe behaviour.** Intimidating, threatening and violent behaviour is out of the question and will not be used when we try to resolve conflict.

- Remember to come up with your own ground rules.

Adapted from Halford, Moore, Wilson, Dyer and Farrugia (2006).

Suggestion 2: Address the ‘Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse’

Based on research involving more than 3000 couples, Gottman and Silver (1999) identified common communication problems among couples which they have termed the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. These four common pitfalls can block effective communication and raise tensions in any relationship. The following table describes each of the four communication hazards and what you can do to address them.

Horseman	How this is expressed	What you can do to address the issue
Criticism	<p>Making negative comments about your partner’s personality or character when complaining about their behaviour.</p> <p><i>“You are always so selfish? You put yourself and your friends ahead of me. You know I don’t always feel up to having people around.”</i></p> <p>“You always...”</p> <p>“You never...”</p>	<p>Assert your feelings without criticising: It’s okay to complain nicely. Comment only on the specific <u>behaviour</u> that is making you unhappy and ‘I’ statements.</p> <p><i>“I didn’t feel up to having a lot of company around tonight. I would have appreciated it if we discussed having people over before you invited anyone.”</i></p> <p>For more information on using ‘I’ statements see Suggestion 3, following this table.</p>
Contempt 	<p>Conveying disgust or being demeaning to your partner by name-calling, using sarcasm, mockery, eye-rolling, scorn or hostile humour.</p> <p><i>“It seems to me like you can remember what time the game starts, but you can’t remember to pick up the milk on the way home. You’ve obviously got your priorities wrong.”</i></p>	<p>Just don’t do it. This is the worst of the pitfalls – it sends the message that your partner disgusts you, and escalates the conflict. It also encourages your partner to become defensive and to engage in stonewalling – all of which will not resolve the issue.</p>

Horseman	How this is expressed	What you can do to address the issue
Defensiveness	<p>Blaming your partner for your behaviour, denying responsibility, making excuses, or meeting one complaint with another.</p> <p><i>“It wasn’t on the to-do list. Isn’t writing that list your job?”</i></p>	<p>Acknowledge, accept and take responsibility for your own behaviour.</p> <p><i>“Maybe we need to sit down together and create the weekly to do list, so that I can make sure I know what has to be done.”</i></p>
Stonewalling	<p>Not responding to your partner when they are speaking to you, or avoiding them.</p> <p><i>Avoiding looking at your partner, being silent, walking out of the room, turning to distractions (e.g. TV or newspaper).</i></p>	<p>Stay connected and calm yourself. Respond to your partner, while recognising that you need an opportunity to calm yourself down. This will help you to remain in the conversation.</p> <p><i>“Mmm hmm,” “I see,” “I just need 20 minutes to calm down so we can talk about this.”</i></p>

Adapted from Gottman and Silver (1999).

Top Tip: Changing the way that you and your partner communicate can be a challenge. These suggestions may take time to implement and a while before you see change, but with practise, patience and, if needed, additional support, you can improve how you communicate with each other.



Top Tip: Remember that these exercises are only examples and results aren't always going to be this great in real life! Don't be disheartened if your practice doesn't turn out like it does here. It can take time for people to respond and think about things differently. Be kind to yourselves when giving these strategies a try.



Suggestion 3: Use 'I' statements

Beginning your sentences with 'I' helps you sound less critical of your partner, which then helps them feel less in need of defending themselves.

Try this...

"I would really appreciate it if you'd cook dinner for me tonight."

Instead of...

"You never do anything to look after me."

Try this...

"I'd really like some support."

Instead of...

"You're just not helping."

Top Tip: Practise using 'I' statements in everyday conversation before you try them in more emotionally charged situations.



Suggestion 4: Follow the steps for resolving conflict

The following steps for resolving conflict provides guidance on how to get started.

Step	Strategies, tips and examples
<p>Step 1 Check your emotions: helps prevent you from acting too impulsively and saying things you might regret.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If you're angry with your partner, take a deep breath and think through how you're going to raise the issue before jumping in. • If you feel too angry don't start the conversation at all until you're calm.
<p>Step 2 Try a gentle approach to get the conversation started: helps to give your conversation a positive start.</p> <p>FACT: 96% of the time, how couples start conversations determines how the conversation will end (Butler, 2006). So, if you start out in an angry way, your discussion will most likely end that way. If you start a conversation gently instead, it's far more likely to produce a positive result.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid blame: Instead of saying <i>"I'm sick to death of you never attending appointments with me,"</i> say <i>"I don't like having to go to all of my appointments on my own. We agreed that you'd try to come to some – can you come next week?"</i>. • Be clear: Tell your partner exactly what you want or need, say <i>"Could you please take the rubbish out and do the dishes,"</i> rather than <i>"Would you tidy the kitchen for once?"</i>. • Use manners: <i>"Please," "thank you"</i> and <i>"I would really appreciate it if..."</i> go a long way but they are often forgotten during stressful conversations. • Be appreciative: If your partner has handled a situation in the past better than they're handling it now, show appreciation for what they've done before and tell them how you miss that quality. Instead of saying <i>"You never talk about what we're going through,"</i> you could say <i>"Remember how we used to talk about our life together? I loved that. I know things are tougher now, but could we start doing that again?"</i>.

Step 3

Try to repair the situation:

helps to alleviate tension and get you 'unstuck' when conversations start to get out of control. They can make things better.

Repair attempts can take different forms:

- **'I feel'** repair attempts: *"I feel judged. Can you try telling me your issue in another way?"*, or *"I feel like we are not really hearing each other"*.
- **'Calm down'** repair attempts: *"I need a break"* or *"Can we stop for a few minutes?"*.
- **'Do over'** repair attempts: *"That's not what I meant, can I start again?"*.
- **'Sorry'** repair attempts: *"How can I fix this?"* or *"I reacted badly, I'm sorry"*.
- **'Trying to compromise'** repair attempts: *"Some of what you are saying is OK by me"* or *"Is there some way we can use both of our ideas/views?"*.
- **'I appreciate'** repair attempts: *"I know this isn't your fault"* or *"Thank you for trying to talk through this"*.

Step 4

Calm yourself and your partner:

helps you overcome any overwhelming thoughts and feelings you have when conversations are tough or don't go well.

Give yourself and your partner the chance to calm down by:

- **Stopping the discussion.** The break should be at least 20 minutes long.
- Spend the break doing something distracting and relaxing, such as stretching, exercising, listening to music, or taking a walk.
- Other good ideas are to practise relaxation exercises (see the **'I feel tense, angry and/or stressed'** section in the *Dealing with Stress and Worry* booklet) or to use the **'Learning to Relax'** CD included in this package.
- Before starting the conversation again, check your partner is ready to re-start. If not, ask them if there is something you can do to help them calm down/improve their mood.

Step 5

Compromise: helps to find solutions that you can both live with.

- The key to compromising is **accepting your partner's views and beliefs**. You don't have to agree with everything, but be willing to consider their opinions.

Step 6

Accept each other's flaws:

helps you to work out how you can accommodate each other.

- Try to accept your partner's flaws, rather than expecting them to change certain aspects of themselves.

Adapted from Butler (2006), and Gottman and Silver (1999).

FACT: Without using good communication skills, couples simply argue and aim to change their partner's mind. However, 69% of what couples argue about does not change.



Source: Butler (2006).

Exercise: Practise compromising by finding common ground

- ➔ Decide on a solvable problem you'd like to tackle together, then sit apart and think independently about the problem.
- ➔ On a piece of paper, draw two columns – one for the aspects of the problem you cannot compromise on and one for the things you can compromise on.
- ➔ Aim to make your can compromise list longer than your cannot compromise list. Your cannot compromise list should be as short as possible and only contain those elements of the problem that are very important to you.
- ➔ Once you've completed your lists, come together and share them, remembering to use the other skills included in this section. Be on the lookout for all **points of agreement**, asking: *on what aspects do we agree? What feelings do we have in common regarding this issue? What goals can we share here? What suggestions could we propose to accomplish our common goals?*
- ➔ Once you've reached your compromise, try your solution for an agreed amount of time. Then, review it together and decide whether or not it seems to be working. If not, repeat this process.

Example

Anna and Mark are unhappy with how little money they've been saving lately and find they are arguing more and more about money. They complete this exercise to get on top of their finances. Their lists contain:

Mark's cannot compromise list	Mark's can compromise list	Anna's cannot compromise list	Anna's can compromise list
<p>I want to set money aside for eating out and seeing a movie once a month.</p> <p>I want to keep our gym memberships.</p>	<p>I can compromise on going to the pub to watch football with my friends.</p> <p>I can compromise on buying a coffee each workday.</p>	<p>I want to save a minimum of \$400 a month.</p> <p>I want to keep our gym memberships.</p> <p>I want to spend money on good quality fruit, vegetables, and lean meats.</p>	<p>I can compromise on you having friends over to our house to watch the football, but I would prefer that they all contribute to the drinks.</p> <p>I can compromise on buying a coffee each workday.</p> <p>I can compromise on the amount of money I spend on clothes.</p>

Mark and Anna's can compromise lists indicate that they should be able to compromise fairly easily on some of their lifestyle expenses – Mark can still enjoy socialising during football season, albeit in a different location and with everybody contributing to costs. Both Anna and Mark are willing to save money by cutting out their daily coffee; however they both wish to maintain their gym memberships. Whilst their cannot compromise lists are quite different, the reduced spending they are willing to compromise on can help them achieve their goals. When they review their plan in two months' time, they can determine whether they need to negotiate aspects of their cannot compromise lists (e.g. going out for dinner or a movie each month, saving \$350 per month).

Adapted from Gottman and Silver (1999).

Top Tip: Conflict can be very emotion-provoking, so your partner may cry or get angry. Try not to be put off by these displays of emotion. For tips on how to deal with tears and anger, see the **'I don't know how to talk about the hard stuff'** section in this booklet.



What others say about resolving conflict

👂 There were periods where Pamela was really cranky. We used to say it was like we were walking on eggshells, everything we did was wrong. Maybe we should have got some counselling at that stage instead of battling through it ourselves. But we battled on, took turns slamming the door and driving off to cool down. 🗨️

Alfie, husband of Pamela, diagnosed with breast cancer.

👂 We had so many problems in the beginning, it was just so much to deal with, and I didn't want to talk so I would just avoid the issue, which frustrated Mandy no end. Once I got to the point where I was ready to talk, I still found things tough but I wanted to help Mandy through this too. So, I tried to compromise and I tried to focus on the situation rather than blaming Mandy. Also, dealing with one problem at a time helped. 🗨️

Otto, husband of Mandy, diagnosed with breast cancer.

👂 There were some horribly long silences in our house for a while there, but eventually we started to be able to deal with the issues. We set some ground rules – one issue at a time, being able to take a break, trying to remain polite and work on the problem – and that kind of provided us with a safety net. 🗨️

Mandy, diagnosed with breast cancer.

How these skills can help couples resolve conflict

– What the experts say

When couples get around the barriers that have prevented them from communicating well, difficulties that arise are much simpler to resolve. For example, if you're tolerant of each other's faults it's easier to act as a team, as you'll have more realistic expectations of each other. This then makes finding common ground and negotiation easier.



Soothing yourself and each other helps to reduce the distress that your body goes through when discussions aren't going well. Relaxing activities can calm down a pounding heart, shallow breathing and sweating. In short, soothing helps you regain control of your mind and body when conflict makes them hard to control.

When conflict is managed well, it can increase your understanding of each other, how close you feel to each other, and your motivation to do caring things for each other.

– **Professor Brian Kelly**

Key Points: Resolving conflict

1. Consider setting ground rules for dealing with conflict.
2. Avoid conflict pitfalls such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling, as they don't address the issue that is creating the conflict. They create more harm.
3. Good communication skills such as 'I' statements, gentle start-ups and compromising can greatly improve how you handle conflict.



Support Organisations and Other Resources

Throughout this booklet we have provided you with lots of information and contacts for support organisations. The following list summarises some of the main sources mentioned in this booklet.

Australian organisations	
Australian Society of Sex Educators, Researchers and Therapists (ASSERT)	02 9280 0151 www.assertnational.org.au
Cancer Australia	1800 624 973 www.canceraustralia.gov.au
Cancer Connect	www.cancerconnections.com.au/content/hey-out-there
Cancer Council Australia	02 8063 4100 www.cancer.org.au
Cancer Council Helpline	13 11 20 (all States)
Cancer Institute NSW	02 8374 5600 www.cancerinstitute.org.au
Lifeline	13 11 14 www.lifeline.org.au
International organisations	
American Cancer Society (US)	www.cancer.org
National Cancer Institute CancerNet (US)	www.cancer.gov/cancerinformation
National Family Caregivers Association	www.nfcares.org

Booklets, publications and websites

“A guide for women with metastatic breast cancer”, National Breast Cancer Centre, 2001, <http://canceraustralia.gov.au/publications-resources/cancer-australia-publications/guide-women-metastatic-breast-cancer>

“Breast cancer husband: How to help your wife (and yourself) during diagnosis, treatment and beyond”, M. Silver, 2004. Available from bookstores and libraries.

“CoupleCARE couple commitment and relationship enhancement: A guidebook for life partners”, W.K. Halford, E. Moore, K. Wilson, C. Dyer, C. Farrugia and K. Judge, 2006. CoupleCARE is a psychological intervention, the following website lists some CoupleCARE practitioners in Australia, www.couplecare.info/Ccareproviders.htm#austanchor. The following weblink provides a summary of the program, www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/newsletter/n4pdf/n4b.pdf

“For patients and families: Coping and support”, The Leukaemia/Bone Marrow Transplant Program of British Columbia, www.leukemiabmtprogram.org/patients_and_family/coping_and_support/index.html

“Questions you might like to ask your doctor”, Cancer Council South Australia, 2007, www.cancersa.org.au/resource_library/3/17/Questions_doctor_May2007.pdf

“Small things often: The Gottman method in a nutshell”, K. Butler, 2006, www.katybutler.com/publications/psychnetorg/index_files/psychtheternet_smallthings.htm

“Someone I love is sick: Helping very young children cope with cancer”, K. McCue, 2012, www.someoneiloveissick.com

“Step-by-step problem solving: A practical guide to ensure problems get (and stay) solved”, R.Y. Chang and P.K. Kelly, 1993. Available from bookstores and libraries.

“Support for caregivers: When someone you love is being treated for cancer”, National Cancer Institute, <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/coping/when-someone-you-love-is-treated.pdf>

“Supporting someone who experiences a loss”, BC Cancer Agency, 2006, www.bccancer.bc.ca/NR/rdonlyres/81FF5251-8913-417F-B386-0CB49A8B5BE8/20143/ExperiencingaLoss1.pdf

“Talking to kids about cancer”, Cancer Council New South Wales, 2010, www.cancercouncil.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Talking-to-Kids-About-Cancer.pdf

“The seven principles for making marriage work”, J. Gottman and N. Silver, 1999. Available from bookstores and libraries.

The best cancer care starts with getting the cancer information you need. Well-informed patients and partners are their own best advocates and invaluable partners for health care providers. **coping together** puts the focus on the patients and their partners, providing the practical information they need to learn new coping skills and build confidence in using them. **coping together** has been put together by a team of researchers and clinicians, including psychologists and nurses, with expertise in helping people cope with cancer.

👤👤 They [health professionals] say you need to relax and you need to communicate with your partner and you need to do this and you need to do that – but they do not tell you how. I think if you do have some strategies... to explain that more, that is very beneficial. 🗣️🗣️
Imogen, diagnosed with breast cancer.

👤👤 If I'm having a problem with my girlfriend, I tend to back off and just want to walk out the door... she's always the one that'll break the ice and communicate and get me back on track, so I'm very weak in that. The communication thing I think is really important and the **Coping-Together** books gave me tips that I could use with that. 🗣️🗣️
Rorey, diagnosed with colorectal cancer.

👤👤 Justin and I had been together for so long that we had started taking each other for granted. The cancer somehow made us appreciate each other more. He started doing small sweet gestures. It made me remember our early years and what I loved about him. 🗣️🗣️
Paula, wife of Justin, diagnosed with prostate cancer.



coping together