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For Caregivers: Coping With Holidays and Special Occasions

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Learn about:

- Caregiving and taking care of yourself
- Managing expectations
- Creating new holiday traditions
- Long-distance caregiving



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Help and Hope



CancerCare is a national nonprofit organization that provides free professional support services to anyone affected by cancer: people with cancer, caregivers, children, loved ones, and the bereaved. CancerCare programs—including counseling and support groups, education, financial assistance, and practical help—are provided by professional oncology social workers and are completely free of charge. Founded in 1944, CancerCare provided individual help to more than 100,000 people last year, in addition to serving more than 1 million unique visitors to our websites. For more information, call 1-800-813-HOPE (4673) or visit www.cancercare.org.

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With some adjustments, holidays and special occasions can be good times to remember.

Holidays and special occasions are meant to be joyful times that create good memories. We all have memories associated with a special birthday or anniversary, for example. We fondly remember the experience of the occasion, including the excitement of spending time with loved ones and celebrating traditions.

But for the person whose life has been affected by cancer, special occasions may stir up a different set of feelings and thoughts. Caregivers and their loved ones with cancer may feel out of

step, worried, or sad when they think about an upcoming holiday or special occasion. For caregivers, it may be especially challenging to keep up with the preparations and



responsibilities that often come with celebrating holidays and other special events. You may wonder how you can enjoy a special occasion when your loved one has just been diagnosed with cancer or is receiving treatment and coping with side effects.

But by planning ahead and using the tips discussed in this booklet, you and your loved ones can find ways to get the most out of special occasions, even amidst the challenge of coping with cancer. It is so important that caregivers remember to take care of themselves, too. This booklet offers practical suggestions on how to do that, as you care for your loved one.

Tips for Coping With Special Occasions

Preparing for holidays is the perfect time to try new roles, discover strengths, and find additional resources for your family, friends, and partners. The key is to try to have good ongoing communication with each other. In that way you can come up with the best plan without placing too much strain on the person with cancer or caregiver.

Some of the common challenges caregivers face during special occasions include:

- Saying “no” to taking on new roles that may come up during special occasions
- Feeling guilty about not doing the things everyone has come to expect
- Hesitating to ask for help with tasks or for time off from a traditional role
- Coping with a lack of sleep and feeling tired

The following tips can help:

Talk to your loved ones about trading traditional roles that you may have had. For example, if your home was the gathering spot during special occasions, consider moving the festivities to another place. The new spot could be the home of another family member or friend, or a restaurant.

Adjust your expectations. This year, you may have to decide how many social events to attend or presents to buy. Ask yourself if the event places too much of a burden on you at this time. For example, if you've always had a big New Year's Eve dinner at your home, think about whether this is too much. Maybe you'll decide not to do it, to invite fewer people, or to have a potluck dinner in which others bring most of the food. On the other hand, if planning and cooking the dinner are things you can and want to do, then go ahead and do them.

Establish new traditions. If you have always done the baking or cooking, for example, you could ask someone else to help. Consider ordering the entire meal from a restaurant or caterer. Another option would be to ask loved ones to bring special items.

Acknowledge your feelings. It's perfectly normal for caregivers to experience feelings of loss or sadness over



how cancer has changed a special occasion. You may also experience a wide range of other emotions such as disappointment or worry about the future. This is normal. Sometimes caregivers feel they have to put on a

happy face so as not to alarm family, friends, or their loved one with cancer.

Try not to hold in all your feelings. Instead, talk about some of your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust, such as a loved one, chaplain, or professional counselor.

Communicate with loved ones about your feelings and concerns surrounding the upcoming special occasion. It is often helpful to talk with others. For example, if you will be attending a social gathering but feel you may become emotional, you might consider talking to the host in advance. Tell him or her that you would appreciate their understanding if you need a little time or privacy to calm yourself.

Remember to take care of yourself too. Caregivers often feel that they don't have enough time to be by themselves. They can feel pulled in many different directions. But if you need to spend some time alone, take the time to do so. Try to spend the time doing something you like, such as reading, listening to music, jogging, meditating, soaking in a hot bath, watching television, getting lost in a video game, or just taking a nap. Think of relaxation as planned time-outs.

You may have to make a contract with yourself to set aside an hour or two a week or perhaps just 20 minutes a day to relax. Remember, that by taking care of yourself, you can take care of your loved one in a more energized way.



Talk with your loved one about what the special occasion means to him or her. For example, a birthday or holiday may have a new or different meaning for someone who is going through treatment. You may want to ask your loved one how he or she would like to celebrate the upcoming special occasion.

Talk to your health care team about the special event. Doctors and other health care providers may have some ideas to help you during these times. They may also be willing to be flexible about appointments so that the special occasion can be celebrated at a certain time. One man's health care team was able to schedule his surgery after the cruise he had planned with his wife. Now this couple has a new tradition: each year they celebrate another post-treatment anniversary.

Enjoy special moments. Rather than dwelling on the way special occasions used to be, try to focus instead on new traditions that have been established. Stay flexible and be kind to yourself and your family.



Imagine yourself not just as a caregiver, but as a care receiver. Give yourself a wonderful gift that only you can give. It could be something you would do by yourself,

something that you wish for yourself, or a special thought or message you give to yourself that you want to hold onto.

Recognize that you are doing your best. Take time to acknowledge all your efforts to care for your loved one and all you are doing to make the special occasion memorable and enjoyable for everyone involved.

Celebrate the strengths you and your loved ones have developed. Cancer can be emotionally, financially, and physically draining for both the person living with cancer and his or her caregivers. But facing the day-

Long-distance caregiving

It can be especially challenging to be a caregiver when a loved one with cancer lives in another state or so far away that commuting is difficult. Stay connected during holidays and year-round by:

- **Calling** Talking by phone regularly is a great way to stay connected from afar. Cell phones make this especially convenient.
- **E-mailing** Like phone calls, e-mail messages provide fast, easy communication.
- **Videotaping special occasions** When a loved one is unable to travel during the holidays or for a special occasion, he or she can still be part of the celebration. Consider videotaping or recording friends, family, and special events as a way to bring the holiday spirit to your loved one.



to-day challenges of living with cancer, many families discover strengths and courage they didn't know they had. For example, you may recall how brave your loved one was during a complicated surgery or while receiving chemotherapy. Or, you may have been surprised when your loved one agreed to let a neighbor drive him to treatment, even though he had always been shy about asking for help. Reflect on the strengths you have developed, and build on them during the holidays.

As a caregiver, it's important to stay flexible. Don't expect yourself to do everything, and take time to recharge your own batteries. And if you need help, reach out. On the next page, we describe the ways that CancerCare® can assist you.

CancerCare® Can Help

When you are caring for someone with cancer and coping with holidays or special events, you may have many concerns about how to manage all the demands. You may feel like you're not sure where to turn. It's perfectly normal to feel confused or nervous. But the more you learn about coping techniques and what to expect, the better you'll feel. Help is available to you. Your most important support will come from your loved one's health care team, family members, and friends. But CancerCare offers these free resources as well:

Counseling Often, when people are caring for a loved one with cancer, they need someone to talk with who will help them sort through the emotional and practical concerns that come up. Oncology social workers provide emotional support, help you find ways to cope, and guide you to resources. CancerCare offers free counseling from professional oncology social workers on staff.



Support groups Talking with other people who are caregivers can help reduce the feeling that you are going through it alone. These groups provide reassurance, suggestions, insight—a safe and supportive place where people can share similar concerns. At CancerCare, people with cancer and their families take part in support groups in person, online, or on the telephone.

Connect® Education Workshops In these workshops, you can hear about the latest research on cancer and topics related to caregiving directly from leading medical experts in one-hour presentations. You can listen live by telephone or you can download podcasts of past workshops from our website.

Publications Free booklets and fact sheets from CancerCare provide up-to-date, easy-to-read information about the latest on cancer, treatments, managing side effects, and coping.

Financial help For those who qualify, CancerCare can provide financial assistance to help with some costs that might arise during your loved one's treatment, such as transportation and child care. Social workers and case managers are knowledgeable about financial issues and will work closely with you to get you the help you need.

Referrals to resources CancerCare can help you learn about other organizations in your community and nationwide that can assist you in finding information and help.

To learn more about how we help, call **1-800-813-HOPE (4673)** or visit **www.cancercare.org**.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q My son suggested that I use an Internet technology called Skype to keep in touch with my mother, who is undergoing treatment for breast cancer and lives across the country. What exactly is Skype, and how can I use it?

A Skype is a new technology that allows people to see and talk to each other online in real time, sort of like a video telephone. Each person has a Web camera that is connected to the Internet through his or her own computer. Skype software, which can be downloaded from www.skype.com, allows people to log onto the computer and call the other person. That way, both parties can have a private conversation while viewing each other. The software is free, as is the cost of the call, so long as both of you are using Skype.

Q My children and grandchildren always come to my home for a weekend-long Christmas celebration. But this year, I'm being treated for colon cancer, and I had to leave my job. I just don't feel like I can afford to host it the way I used to. How can I explain this to my grandchildren, especially the younger ones?

A First, think of this as an opportunity to have a family talk. One way to do this is to gather everyone and say that

Christmas will be celebrated differently this year, but that this is just a temporary situation. Ask the other people in your family if they can help think of ways that you can celebrate differently. For instance, kids might cut out pictures and make special frames to use for treasured family photos of past Christmas celebrations.

Next, ask everyone if they have feelings about the upcoming celebration. Particularly with children, it's important to emphasize that feelings of sadness or anger are okay. It's especially important to communicate with children. If they feel as if they're being kept in the dark, it makes them feel more confused and fearful.

Q My mom is homebound and not able to leave the house for her niece's birthday party. How can we help include her in the celebration when we live in a different part of the country?

A One possible solution would be to videotape the party for her. Asking each person at the party to film a little clip and wish her well is a way to bring the party to her and let her know she was on people's minds. This might also establish a new family tradition: relatives can videotape various occasions and start a family library of special events that can be viewed again and again.

Resources

CancerCare

1-800-813-HOPE (4673)

www.cancercares.org

American Cancer Society

1-800-227-2345

www.cancer.org

Cancer.Net

Patient information from the American Society of Clinical Oncology

www.cancer.net

Cancer Support Community

www.cancersupportcommunity.org

National Cancer Institute

Cancer Information Service

1-800-422-6237

www.cancer.gov

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship

1-877-622-7937

www.canceradvocacy.org



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The information presented in this patient booklet is provided for your general information only. It is not intended as medical advice and should not be relied upon as a substitute for consultations with qualified health professionals who are aware of your specific situation. We encourage you to take information and questions back to your individual health care provider as a way of creating a dialogue and partnership about your cancer and your treatment.

All people depicted in the photographs in this booklet are models and are used for illustrative purposes only.

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When one word changes your world,

CANCERcare[®]

makes all the difference



With CancerCare,
the difference comes from:

- Professional oncology social workers
- Free counseling for you and your loved ones
- Education and practical help
- Up-to-date information

Our trusted team of professionally trained oncology social workers provides free counseling, education and practical help for you and your loved ones.



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