CAREGIVING DURING THE HOLIDAYS

The holiday season can bring a wide range of emotions. It is a time when families of many different cultures gather together to create long-lasting memories; however, for the person who is caring for a loved one with cancer, life is not always so pleasant. For families affected by cancer the traditional holiday spirit may be the furthest thing from their mind.

TIPS FOR CAREGIVING FOR A LOVED ONE WITH CANCER DURING HOLIDAYS

The “new normal” can be quite challenging—especially for caregivers. Life as you know it has changed. It can take some time and celebratory moments may prompt questions you may not have considered before, such as: How do I emotionally handle this holiday season while caring for a loved one with cancer? How can I express my own concerns without being perceived as self-centered or insensitive? How can I take care of myself and the person that I love also? What will my life look like next year?

By planning ahead and using the tips discussed in this fact sheet, caregivers can learn different ways to help alleviate the stress one may associate with caregiving during the holiday season.

Here are some helpful tips for caregiving during the holidays. The acronym S.U.P.P.O.R.T can be used to encompass the different ways you as a caregiver can seek support while also being supportive of your loved one:

Support Network. A cancer diagnosis can bring about a wide range of emotions not only to the person affected by cancer but to you as their caregiver as well. As the holidays symbolically represent a joyful time, it is often difficult to cope with challenging life changes and difficult decisions, which is why a support network is so important. CaringBridge helps you set up a free website to keep loved ones informed and list ways they can help www.caringbridge.org. CancerCare’s oncology social workers provide counseling to anyone affected by cancer: online, face-to-face, or over the telephone. Oncology social workers can also direct you to organizations that address the concerns of caregivers.

A social support network can help address emotional concerns and provide useful feedback and coping skills, including how to have honest and meaningful discussions and ways to express your feelings.

Understand. The concept of understanding stems from being compassionate and thoughtful. It can be difficult to adjust to change especially if your loved one is not in the “holiday spirit.” However, having the ability to empathize with that person—being able to better understand what that person is thinking—can be more meaningful than all the external trappings of the holiday
season. Organizations like Imerman Angels (www.imermanangels.org) and Cancer Hope Network (www.cancerhopenetwork.org) can connect you to other caregivers and can best understand your concerns and normalize your experience, as well as provide insights into what worked for them.

**Practice Self-Care.** The holidays are always a hectic time. The pressures of decorating, buying presents, preparing special foods can make taking your loved one to a doctor’s appointment that much more difficult, which is why self-care is so important. As a caregiver you may experience various feelings such as sadness, anger, resentment, frustration and even a loss of hope under all these demands. Self-care means identifying your own individual needs and taking steps to meet them. It is taking time to do some of the activities that nurture you. Self-care can include, but is not limited to, going for a walk, reading a book, exercising, and practicing mindfulness and relaxation techniques so that you can actively take care of others in the process. There is no right or wrong way in defining self-care as long as you are investing some time and energy in taking care of yourself.

**Prepare Questions for Health Care Providers.** Staying informed can create a smoother transition throughout the holidays. No matter the diagnosis, stage or treatment, having good communication with the medical team can assist you throughout the process. Prior to meeting with the medical team, you and your loved one can brainstorm about specific medical concerns that might impact the ability to celebrate. An advantage of doing so can include the medical team suggesting ways your loved one can more fully participate whether at home or in the hospital.

**Organize.** Trying to celebrate can be difficult during the holidays; as a caregiver it is helpful to find the right balance for you. The holiday season often requires a lot of planning and preparation. Whether it’s organizing a celebration or family reunion, it’s important to try to minimize the usual holiday stressors. Allow yourself sufficient time to plan which might include putting some traditions aside this year. Whatever you decide, give yourself permission to work at your own pace—doing so may help create new traditions for you and your loved ones.

**Respect Your Loved One’s Decisions.** During the holidays it can be especially helpful to support a loved one’s decision. As a caregiver this can be challenging; however, remember that their experience is unique to them and without their input too many activities can be overwhelming. By talking through your feelings with a loved one, you can create lasting holiday memories filled with love and compassion.

**Try Out New Memories.** Life during the holidays is never the same when a loved one is affected by cancer; however, that should not discourage you as their caregiver from being innovative and creating new memories. Including others and remaining respectful of your loved one’s strengths and weaknesses can help foster new traditions. Focusing on the here and now can often times help broaden a person’s perception of what is most important during the holidays: the love and support of family and friends.

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**CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

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