

# SESSION 7: SOCIAL SUPPORT AND COMMUNICATION

## Review

Since the last session, you chose one communication exercise to practice with your loved one.

- Which one did you complete and how did this go for both of you?
- What did you notice about your communication style?
- Is there anything you aim to change?

### AGENDA

In today's session, we will:

- 1 Review your practice since our last session
- 2 Learn ways to enhance the support you receive from others
- 3 Learn to strengthen communication skills with friends, family, your healthcare team, your children, and your employer

## In today's session we will cover three topics:

**1. Enhancing the support** you receive and managing help from friends and family. This is helpful if you have trouble accepting help from others or are frustrated by friends and family during this time.

**2. Communicating with your loved one's healthcare team.** This is helpful if you are having a difficulty getting your questions answered or are hesitant to ask.

**3. Talking to your children** about your loved one's illness or **communicating with your employer.** This is helpful if you have young children or are struggling at work and need more flexibility

# 1. Enhancing Social Support and Managing Well-Meaning Family and Friends

One of the most common mistakes people make is thinking that they can do it all by themselves and need no help. If you can avoid falling into this trap, you will be better off.

Your friends and family want to help you, but sometimes they may not realize you need help, or don't know how to help. Some people may offer advice, stories, or information that is not useful, and we need to filter it out. Offering concrete suggestions will give you some relief by making sure you get your needs met and will also allow your friends or family members to feel useful.

The **type** of support we receive falls into three categories:

Practical	Emotional/Psychological	Informational
Transportation	Love	Sharing of personal experience
Accompanying to medical visits	Encouragement	Guidance and advice
Household chores	Fun	Knowledge and education
Errands	Sharing	Decision-making
Meal Preparation/ Cooking	Talking	
Child-care	Warmth	
Financial assistance	Intimacy	
	Validation	
	Hope	

## Many people can be a source of support:

- Friends
- Relatives
- Neighbors
- Ministers/Clergy
- Acquaintances
- Teachers/Mentors
- Pets
- Colleagues

## Mismatched support:

### Example 1

Your friend calls often to check on you and encourages you to tell her how you are feeling and coping after your loved one started chemotherapy or radiation.

You are overwhelmed with getting back to work, making dinner for your family, and getting the house straightened up.

While your friend is offering \_\_\_\_\_ support, in this moment you need \_\_\_\_\_ support.

## How to ask for or optimize the support you need:

- Assess the situation
- Identify the type of support you need
- Identify who might be best equipped to provide you with that type of support
- Notice any barriers associated with asking for and receiving support
- Am I willing to ask for help?
- Am I willing to receive help?
- Do I think that asking for help makes me seem weak?
- Do I believe that I should be able to do it all by myself?
- Do I think that I am burdening others by asking for their help?
- Challenge yourself as to whether your beliefs about asking for and receiving support are accurate. For instance, is receiving support really a sign of weakness? If someone asked you for support, would you label him/her as weak? What would you tell a friend to do?
- Ask for support: In response to Example 1, you could say, “I appreciate your concern for me and it is comforting to know that you are here to listen. I know you are trying to help, and right now, I feel very overwhelmed with several things that I need to get done and my fatigue is getting in the way of doing them. Would you have any time to help me this week?”



## 2. Communicating with the healthcare team:

How comfortable are you with posing questions to the medical team? What helps you feel confident? When you are not at the hospital, you might find yourself hesitant to call or email with questions or concerns. This is a good time to remind yourself that your questions are important and matter to the health of your loved one.

The nurses and doctors on your health care team are a resource, and no question is insignificant. It is better to be safe than sorry, and the health care team wants to be able to answer your questions and address your concerns to the best of their ability.

### Tips for effective communication:

- 1. Write out your questions on a notecard or on a list on your phone or tablet that you bring with you to the next visit.** Say to your loved one's doctor or nurse: "We have three things we want to ask about." This sets the expectation that you have three things you would like to cover; they are less likely to move on to something else before answering your questions, and you are more likely to remember to ask all three questions.
- 2. Bring another friend or family member with you to your appointment.** This helps for two reasons. First, they can help make sure that you have asked all your questions. Second, they can help you remember what the doctor said in the appointment. They may also hear things differently, so it helps to have another perspective.
- 3. To determine what you need and how to approach communication with a doctor, nurse, or other healthcare provider, ask yourself the following questions:**
  - What are my **goals** for this conversation?
  - What information would be helpful for me, and what information might not?
  - How do I want this **relationship** to be after this conversation with this person?
  - How do I want to **feel about myself** after this conversation?

## Example

- Situation:** Speaking with clinician
- Goals:** I want to learn better strategies, get a referral to acupuncture, or try medications to help with my loved one's pain
- Relationship:** I want to have good rapport with my loved one's clinician and respect towards our relationship
- Myself:** I want to feel like I got answers and understand the plan, and that I was respectful and confident



## 3. Talking to children or employers

### Communication with Children

Communicating with children about your loved one's cancer diagnosis and treatment can be difficult, but a lot of research has been done over the years that suggests it is important to have discussions with children and involve them in what is going on, to a healthy degree.

In addition, the Marjorie E. Korff Parenting at a Challenging Time (PACT) Program at the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center offers guidance to parents and families who receive treatment at MGH and are concerned about the impact of their diagnosis on their children. Clinicians can provide individual consultations or several sessions to you and/or your loved one to help prepare to talk to your children. A member of your medical team can request a consultation, or you can call the referral line at 617-724-7272.

For parents and families who receive treatment at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, the Talking with Children about Cancer Program can provide similar support. A member of your medical team can request a consultation, or you can call the referral line at 212-639-7029.

### Below are some suggestions for how to talk to children about illness.

- Welcome and explore your child's questions
- Address medical updates with changes that the child can see or observe
- It is okay if you don't have an immediate answer to a question
- Allow your child to come up with a question or two that he/she would like answered by the medical team
- Seek out opportunities to talk and carve out protected family time
- It's alright to share your emotional reactions—in this way you are teaching your child that it is acceptable to experience a range of emotions
- Think about the timing of information
- Respect a child's wishes not to talk
- Written communication can be helpful
- Help other adults talk with your child about the illness
- Hospital visits often help children feel less worried



- Juggling children’s schedules and trying to keep their lives as normal as possible often requires more help from family and friends
- Use other parents and trusted friends to help with your children or other dependents that you are currently caring for

## Communication with Employers and Colleagues

While taking care of your loved one, it can become even more challenging to balance the demands of your job and of caregiving. It may be helpful to have conversations with your employer and co-workers early in the process so that everyone has advanced notice and can plan accordingly. It is normal to feel apprehensive about asking for time off and sharing your loved one’s illness with your employer. Nonetheless, it is important to find the balance between the need to share to request time off or accommodations, while respecting your right to privacy about details. Before you have these conversations, think about:



- 1) *What are my goals for this conversation?*
- 2) *Can I practice/role-play what I want to ask and my responses to questions others may ask of me?*

### Keep These Tips in Mind:

- Be realistic about your ability to maintain a demanding job while taking care of your loved one
- Give your employer/co-workers enough advanced notice about your scheduling needs
- Propose and arrange for alternative work schedules or working from home based on the amount of time you need
- Be specific in your requests for time off and other accommodations
- Express your ongoing enthusiasm for your job
- Remain flexible in your requests and solutions
- Be clear and keep the lines of communication open
- Avoid oversharing to maintain privacy (e.g., you do not need to share details about your loved one to justify receiving time off)
- Stay in touch with your boss and coworkers throughout the process as needed



## Remember How to Make an Assertive Statement:

### Start with the Three F's

- 1. Statement of Fact** (e.g., I am the primary caregiver for my loved one which requires my undivided attention for a period of time)
- 2. Statement of Feeling** (e.g., I enjoy my work, and look forward to returning after his/her recovery)
- 3. Statement of Fair Request** (e.g., I am asking to take 2 months off/work from home to care for my loved one and train someone to assist with my normal duties temporarily)

If you are facing difficulty with money and would like to speak with someone to discuss financial assistance, please ask your medical team for a referral to the social worker in the department.

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) guarantees up to 12 weeks off per year to take care of a seriously ill loved one. Check if your employer allows for use of FMLA during this time.

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## Home Practice

1. Choose to make an assertive statement with someone in your social support network, or practice communicating with your healthcare team, employer, or children. Try to draft your statement in advance. Note what goes well and what may not go well.
2. Find a quiet, private space and practice diaphragmatic breathing or Progressive Muscle Relaxation for 10-15 minutes once a day.

## Notes

You can use this “Notes” section to jot down thoughts about the session or the practice exercise. You may also use this space to write down questions to ask the healthcare team, reminders to yourself, or questions for your next session with us.

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