

Track 5: Coping Styles – Adapting to Your Illness

[Narrator]

As we learned from the men's support group, many factors play an important part in the decisions and adjustments you need to make after a cancer diagnosis. For example, these include your age, whether you're employed or retired, whether you're planning a family or have grandchildren, or whether you are living alone or are caring for children or other relatives. They also include health issues and financial concerns. Many of these needed changes can be difficult to accept. In addition, your treatments may make you anxious or depressed or emotional. These all stress the importance of finding support and talking with the people in your life you are closest to or going back to people who have helped you with problems in the past. The following exchange between a long-term survivor and one recently diagnosed is an example of this type of help.

[Marta (Newly diagnosed)]

One of our biggest questions is about telling our niños — our children — who are 8 and 10. In our culture we believe children shouldn't have to know about illnesses because they might be afraid. I've been afraid to tell them.

[Maria]

I was afraid too. My little boy has some problems and stress is bad for him. But I talked to my social worker, and she suggested we say the word “lymphoma” and explain I have to have medicine called chemo that makes me tired, but can help me. My son accepted it and is very sweet to me. I told him hugs and kisses make me feel relaxed and help me get my rest so he gives me lots. Find the right words for your children to let them know why you feel tired or sick but also let them know you still love them.

[Narrator]

It's also good to remember that you're not alone. There are thousands of others figuring out how to cope with lymphoma and its symptoms, side effects and uncertainties.

There are also many different types of help and support your healthcare team can suggest. We've already learned about support groups, but support groups aren't for everyone. Let's listen to how Charlene found the help she needed.

[Charlene]

I'm a pretty private person. My best friend is a talker and she keeps telling me I should go to a support group, but that's just not for me. I do talk to her, but while she tries hard, even she can't really understand what I'm going through with all these meds, the foggy thinking, the fear that I have about how I might not be able to stay in my home and take care of myself because of this illness. The nurse at the clinic suggested I keep a daily journal – put my feelings down on paper just to get them out. I've tried that, but it doesn't seem to help very much.

Then Carlotta, the social worker at the treatment center, told me about a program that would match me with another person with a similar diagnosis. They found a woman named Carrie who is almost my age, single, and she's been battling this disease for over three years. The first time Carrie called me on the phone, we knew we had a lot in common.

Talking to Carrie gave me a lot of hope. I can talk to Carrie about anything. She's become a good friend to me.

The other person who has helped me is the priest at my parish. One day after church, he said he had heard that I haven't been feeling too well lately, and he asked if he could come and visit me at home, and I quickly agreed. Once I talked to Father Chris, I was surprised that he knew so much about cancer. He said that he is a part of a national group of faith leaders who are trained to understand the problems and struggles that people with cancer face. He understood the language and the terms. But most of all, he understood my fears. He also asked if I would allow him to suggest ways other parish members could help. I agreed, so now I feel like I have a bigger family, but they aren't intrusive. They only help when I want help.

[Carlotta (Social Worker)]

With all of the different treatment choices and resources available, it's important for you to tell your health care team what kinds of services and supports you find most helpful. Clinics and doctors' offices can seem really busy, but if you ask, someone will sit down with you and go over your treatment plan and support resources. It saves time in the long run if they can get to know you and to know the best way to help you make decisions and better cope with your illness. The better you know yourself and what helps you to cope, the better the people caring for you are able to support you. But you must be a self-advocate. You need to be direct in asking for what you need and you need to stand up for your rights to good care and support.

[Charlene]

It's taken me awhile to figure out that I don't always have to do everything for myself, even though I have taken that route in the past. It took me ending up in the hospital to realize that when I have a problem, I have to call the clinic before things get too serious. My church family has been like a rock. Lymphoma is a very serious illness, but it doesn't have to be the end of my life, just a turn in path with some outstretched helping hands that I can grab onto along the way.