

TALKING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS: FEELING ISOLATED

When struck with a life-altering diagnosis, many caregivers and patients feel as if friends and family begin to shy away from the caregiver and patient's lives. Instead of calling regularly or dropping by, previously close relationships begin to fade, as these individuals are seemingly unable to cope with your or your loved one's diagnosis. This page will examine the reasons behind these isolating situations and some tips for you to navigate this common challenge.

Why does this happen?

The important aspect to remember is that it is not your fault. You did not cause this situation, and often, it is because of a multitude of emotions on your friend's and family's end that produce this isolation. Here are some reasons that friends and family may appear to separate themselves from your or your loved one's diagnosis:

Survivorship Guilt: As you navigate the challenges of cancer diagnosis, friends and family may feel grateful and relieved that cancer diagnosis did not occur to them. As they experience this relief, they then may feel ashamed for having this emotion. Having survivorship guilt can result in avoidance of the situation that stirs up this emotion, and therefore, results in isolating themselves from you and/or your loved one.

Vulnerability: If family and friends have similar parallels in their lives, such as a parent or spouse the same age as your loved one with cancer, they may be able to picture their loved one also being diagnosed with cancer. This relates to survivorship guilt, for while their family is healthy, they can visualize how cancer would also affect their lives by witnessing how it has affected yours. This can result in family and friends distancing themselves from a reminder of how cancer could impact their lives.

Awkwardness: Family and friends may simply not know what to say, how to act, or what to do when interacting with you and your family. It can be difficult to cope with others' trauma, and people often feel uncomfortable and do not want to do or say the wrong thing. As a result, you may experience more distant care from these individuals, such as hearing "let me know if there is anything I can do to help," but not witnessing follow-up from these individuals. (This is termed "pseudo-care").

Tips for navigating this challenge

- You may need to reassure friends and family that you do not expect them to solve any problems, or become a caregiver. They may not know what your expectations are in terms of their role in your or your loved one's diagnosis.
- If you feel comfortable doing so, openly acknowledge how it may be hard for them to see you or your loved one in this state, but how their support helps more than they could imagine.
- Provide people with specific lists of tasks you could use help with. This can eliminate feelings of awkwardness, and encourage feelings of helpfulness.
- Lastly, it is not your responsibility to chase friends and family. Find peace and comfort with supportive individuals, and make new connections through support groups or engaging in new community activities.