

[TRACK 4: SURVIVOR STORIES: TALKING ABOUT FEELINGS]

[Narrator]

Now that we have reviewed the basics, let's listen to some cancer survivors, and hear how they handled specific situations. Our first is Teri, a 25-year-old woman who found a lump in the right side of her neck. She has known her regular doctor, Dr. Blake for 5 years, but she has never been sick before. Now Dr. Blake has referred Teri to a surgeon for tests. Lets hear how Teri describes her visit to her regular doctor to discuss the results of her biopsy and chest x-ray.

Teri, 25 years old

[Teri]

I went into Dr. Blake's office... he was sitting behind his desk reading some papers. Then, he looked straight at me and I sort of heard him say something like, "Teri, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but your biopsy is malignant. The pathologist needs to do some more tests to find out what kind of cancer you have." He kept on talking, I saw his lips moving, but I couldn't hear what he was saying. All I could do was stare at him, thinking, "There must be some mistake. I feel fine. I can't have cancer."

[Narrator]

If Dr. Blake had been looking carefully at Teri's face and gesture -- her "body language" -- he would have realized that she was having a hard time understanding what he was saying. Often in that emotional first meeting with the doctor, a newly diagnosed cancer survivor will not remember much of what the doctor said.

[Teri]

I learned that I need to be more assertive and use "I" messages. I really needed to understand what was going on. I should have asked Dr. Blake to slow down. And, if I had thought of it, I should have written down what he was saying. That way I could have looked it over after I calmed down a little. So, the next time I went to see Dr. Blake, I had asked a close friend to come along to write down important notes. That was a huge help. At other times, when she wasn't able to come with me, I brought a tape recorder.

[Narrator]

Teri has learned how to handle communicating with her doctor, but she faces other challenges in communicating with her husband, Mike. He loves Teri and does not want anything bad to happen to her, but he is very scared. He is afraid to tell her how he feels because he does not want her to know how much the idea of cancer scares him. This reaction is common in many families, because people want to protect their loved ones. Mike's face and eyes tell Teri that he is worried, even though he tells her he knows she will be fine. Teri tells him that she is scared and asks him if he is. Mike manages to admit that he is scared, too, but he reassures Teri that he will be there to help. When they share their feelings, they feel stronger knowing that they are in it together. This helps them tell each other what they need from each other to get through the experience of cancer.

[Teri]

While I was in the hospital for a biopsy, I was in a lot of pain. I took the pain medicine the nurses had given me, but it made me sick to my stomach. So, they gave me some other medicine for my stomach. I could see that Mike was feeling pretty helpless. He wanted to help me, but what could he do? The only thing he could do was try to get me to think about anything that would help me forget being in the hospital and having cancer.

[Teri]

A little later, I got bad cramps. I was all curled up on the hospital bed. So, Mike asked me if I wanted him to curl up with me and hold me tight, the way he does at home. He's so sweet... he really wants to help me. I said, "yes", hoping it would make both of us feel better.

[Narrator]

People who have been sexually intimate before cancer need to take time to talk about their many different feelings after cancer has come into their relationship. One partner may be afraid of hurting the other physically during sexual activity. A person with cancer may worry about not being physically attractive to his or her partner after having cancer. Talking about feelings is not an easy thing for everyone to do. Social workers, nurses, psychologists, and clergy are some people who can help you deal with these feelings. If the first person you ask for help is not able to give you the help you need, ask them to refer you to someone else. Support groups are sometimes a good place to talk about these feelings.

[Narrator]

Why not try a simple exercise now, if it's convenient for you. Take some paper and a pencil and write down all the things you would like to know about your cancer. Try not to think about it first -- just write your thoughts down as they come into your head. Keep in mind that any question that comes up is a good question. When you have finished writing down your questions, look them over. Are there any that you have never asked? Next to these questions, write down the name of someone who you think may be able to help you get the answer. That person could be your doctor, or a clinic nurse, social worker, support group member, home health-care nurse, hospital educator, librarian, or pharmacist.

Another resource to help you better communicate with your health care team is the NCCS booklet on Teamwork. This booklet provides lists of questions and tips that might be useful at different points in your experience, from before treatment begins through your transition off of treatment. This free booklet is available online at www.canceradvocacy.org, or you can order a copy by calling 888.650.9127.