

[TRACK 5: SURVIVOR STORIES: CULTURAL BARRIERS]

Maria Elena and Tereza, both 55 years old

[Narrator]

Let's hear from another cancer survivor. This is Maria Elena Martinez, who is 55 years old. She came from Mexico 10 years ago with her husband, Jose, and two of her four grown children. Maria speaks basic English pretty well, but Jose does not. Her surgeon has just telephoned Maria to tell her that her biopsy shows breast cancer. He has set up an appointment for her tomorrow so that he can tell her about the treatment she will get.

[Maria Elena]

When my doctor called, I was home all alone. I was so shocked to hear that I have cancer -- I didn't know what to do. Good thing that Jose came home soon. "How could this happen? What can I do?" I asked him. We didn't know, but decided not to tell the children until we had more time to think about it.

[Maria Elena]

I asked Jose to come to the clinic with me the next day. The surgeon talked so fast, with so many words we did not know. He said "You must have an operation, a mastectomy" He had already scheduled the operation for a few days later.

[Maria Elena]

We didn't know what to do, it was all happening so fast. I was brought up to show respeto for important people, like this surgeon. He knows so much. But, I couldn't even look at him as he talked. All I knew was that I was unhappier than ever before in my life. His nurse asked me to sign a consent form, to say it's OK to have the operation. If he thought it was the right thing to do, I would do it. Even though I wanted more time to think about it, I signed the form anyway. Otherwise, he might think that I do not respect him.

[Maria Elena]

After that, I talked with my children... told them about my cancer and what had happened with the surgeon. They were shocked, too. They were so good, hugged me, kissed me. So good. My daughter then thought about her friend's mother -- her name is Tereza. She had breast cancer and got treated about two years ago. She is very healthy and happy now. I called Tereza right away.

[Tereza]

I was so happy to help Maria Elena. I went over to see her soon after she heard about her diagnosis. I told her that I had had breast cancer, too, and got good treatment for it. I told her that I know how afraid I was when I found out. We talked about the surgeon. Yes, I said, respect is important to both of us. But, that is not enough now. This is your decision and it will affect your life and happiness. There are other treatments for women with breast cancer. Me, I had just a small part of my breast removed and then had radiation. Maybe that could work for you, I told her. You need to ask and find out. It is your doctor's responsibility to tell you in words you can understand or to have someone else give you that information. It is your right to find out.

[Maria Elena]

I was even a little more scared, even though I thought, maybe, there was some hope. But, I told Tereza that the operation was already scheduled. How can I change that now? And, maybe it's dangerous to wait. But no, Tereza said I could ask that, too. Her doctor had told her it was OK for her to wait a week or

two to make sure she was comfortable with her decision. What she says makes me feel better, stronger. Yes, it is my decision. I will talk with Jose and my children... tell them how I feel and see how they feel. Tereza helped me decide to go see the surgeon and tell him that I need more information... I want to know if there is some other treatment for me.

[Narrator]

Maria Elena has learned three important communications skills: she is ready to be assertive, she has started using "I" messages, and is expressing her feelings. To get really prepared to talk with the surgeon, Maria Elena asked Tereza to do a role-play exercise with her; Maria Elena would act as herself and Tereza would act as the surgeon. It's good for Maria Elena to practice with Tereza. This way she might not be so scared talking with the surgeon.

[Narrator]

This is an exercise you can try, too, with or without a role-play partner. Pretend you are Maria Elena getting ready to walk into the surgeon's office. Think about what you need to say and how you will say it. Use your skills. Be assertive... use "I" messages... and express how you feel. If you are scared or confused, that's OK. The surgeon needs to know that in order to understand your feelings and respond in the right way.