

[TRACK 4: SURVIVOR STORIES: TALKING TO FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND CO-WORKERS]

Ellen, 42 years old: Part I

[Narrator]

Let's hear from another cancer survivor. Ellen is 42 years old, and comes from London. She is the single mother of two daughters, who are 14 and 16. Her ex-husband has not called or seen them since their divorce, and he provides no financial support for the children.

[Ellen]

I was sitting in my cancer-doctor's office -- she had just told me that I have ovarian cancer and that treatment should begin as soon as possible. I remember bursting out crying -- I was overwhelmed. How could this be happening to me? How am I going to handle treatment and still be able to work and take care of my kids? Everyone depends on me!

[Ellen]

I told my doctor that I wasn't ready to tell my daughters about my cancer -- they would be scared that I was going to die, and I was too scared to talk about it with them at that time. I needed some time to let the news sink in. A million questions ran through my mind, but I couldn't put them into words. My doctor suggested that I take a few days to think about my condition and to make an appointment to come back and talk with her within the week. She suggested that I might want to bring someone along with me at that appointment. She was right when she said, "It's hard to remember everything I say or that you want to ask especially, in the beginning. Having someone along can help."

[Narrator]

Let's look at how Ellen uses the five steps approach to work on solving her problem. First step -- she has to say what the problem is.

[Ellen]

The one problem I had right away was how to tell my family, friends, and co-workers about my cancer? But, my bigger problem was figuring out how I would be able to take care of my girls if I have to stop working or work less during my chemotherapy. Sure, it's a lot to think about, but I realized, I've already faced a lot of big problems in my life. I've survived a messy divorce, raised two wonderful girls, and had to work to support us all for many years. I won't say it's been easy, but we made it... and the tough times actually brought my girls and me closer together. When the crisis first hits you, you feel too overwhelmed to act -- that's only natural. But, when you can look at your problems and identify the most important one to work on first, you realize you can do it, you can solve that problem, and the other ones, too.

[Narrator]

As you think about Ellen's problem, does it remind you of crises you have faced in the past? What worked, and what didn't work for you in solving these problems? What do you see as Ellen's problem? If Ellen sees herself as the family caretaker, how hard will it be for her to ask for and get help?

[Narrator]

As Ellen prepares for Step 2 -- getting the facts -- she knows that her situation is serious and she hopes that treatment will help. She knows that she needs more information.

[Ellen]

After I got my diagnosis, I went home and thought about what the doctor told me. I also wrote down every question that came to mind. There was so much I needed to find out. I had to face the fact that, since I was so used to being the one to take care of everyone else, it was going to be hard for me to think about asking other people for help.

[Ellen]

I was also very worried about how to tell my girls and my parents about what was happening. I didn't want to scare them, but I also needed them to understand how serious my illness is and that I would need their help to get through the treatment. Since I have always taken care of everyone else, it's hard thinking about how I would need them to help me. I also wondered how they would react to the news and how they would deal with my not being able to do everything for them as I did in the past. I want my daughters to have as normal a life as possible in school and with their other activities. And, I was worried that other people at work would have to take over some of my duties and that they might begin to resent the extra work. Who should I tell at work and what should I tell them?

[Ellen]

It occurred to me that the only way to start answering these worries was to find out what to expect during treatment. So, I wrote down a whole list of questions for my doctor, like: How would chemotherapy help me? What would happen if I decided not to have it? How often would my treatments be scheduled? Where would I have to go to get my treatments? How is the chemotherapy given and who will give it to me? How would I feel after each treatment? If I had bad side effects, what could I take to help me feel better? How long would it take before I would know if the treatment was helping? And, is there someone who can help me work through all my concerns, about myself, my daughters, and our finances?

Narrator:

You can also read NCCS's booklet on Teamwork to help you better communicate with your health care team. 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. The free booklet is available online at www.canceradvocacy.org, or you can order a copy by calling 888.650.9127.

Ellen, 42 years old: Part II

[Narrator]

Ellen is now prepared to talk with her doctor to answer these questions and take Step 3 --creating her plan of action.

[Ellen]

The first part of my plan was to ask a friend to come with me to my doctor's appointment, to write

down the doctor's answers to each of my questions. That way, I wouldn't have to try to remember everything, which I knew would be impossible. I also asked my friend to remind me if I was forgetting to ask any of my questions -- I wanted to make the most of this visit.

[Ellen]

The next part of the plan was to figure out who I should tell about my condition and when I should tell them. I really felt the need to tell my daughters and parents about my cancer as soon as I could, because I need to be honest with them and also because I was hopeful that treatment would help. But, I decided that I needed more time and information before talking to my closest friends at work and to my supervisor.

[Narrator]

What else do you think Ellen needs to know before she talks to people at work? Let's hear how Ellen takes Step 4 -- carrying out her plan.

At the next meeting with my doctor, I told her what I was most worried about. I also asked her how other patients handle such a tough situation. I wanted to know if there was someone I could talk to who could help me figure out how much to say to my family, friends, and people at work. My doctor introduced me to a nurse and a social worker who are part of my cancer care team. They told me that they are both there to help with any concerns that I might have.

The social worker was a big help in giving Ellen suggestions regarding how to help her daughters understand what was going on, and ways to cope more effectively, too. She also told her about support groups for women with ovarian cancer, including one that is held at the cancer center and another that is online—so she didn't even have to leave home! She said that many women find support groups a good place to get not just information, but also support from people who have gone through what Ellen was about to begin. At first, Ellen didn't like the idea of a support group, and talking about her problems with a group of women she didn't even know. So she decided to think about it.

[Ellen]

Well, on the first day of chemotherapy, I met another woman who was being treated for ovarian cancer. I guess we had so much in common, that I found it very easy to talk with her. She told me that she attends a support group and finds it really quite helpful. So, I thought I would give it a try. This was an important step for me. I was so used to trying to handle everything myself. But, getting more information was a big part of my plan, so I would do what I had to do to make my plan work.

[Narrator]

By breaking her problem down into smaller parts, Ellen seems to feel that she can handle it. As she works through her plan, Ellen is taking Step 5, which is checking the plan as you go along and adjusting it when needed.

[Ellen]

I found it helpful to make a list of what might or might not work for me as I faced each new challenge. I used the meetings with my social worker and my support group as safe places to talk

about my concerns, and also to test out my problem-solving skills. I learned a lot about what works and what doesn't work from other women who were in my situation.

[Narrator]

In light of Ellen's experience, think about the following questions. Does Ellen now feel more comfortable asking for help when she needs it? Do you think Ellen feels more comfortable now talking to her children, friends, and co-workers? Do you think these people feel they can talk to Ellen about their hopes and concerns? How will what Ellen learns help her with future issues?

[Ellen]

It certainly has become easier to talk to my girls and to ask for help when I'm not feeling well. As I have gotten further into treatment, other issues have come up. I know that I may have to rethink parts of my plan. That's OK -- I feel like I'm better able to handle whatever might come my way now.