

Dealing with Breast Cancer Stresses: Supporting the Supporters

Ellyn Kerr, MSc, technical communications consultant | October 20, 2014

With [one in eight women](#) developing invasive breast cancer in her lifetime, most of us know at least one person who has been diagnosed. Each October, Breast Cancer Awareness month in North America highlights the excruciating experience of this disease and its courses of treatment.



In a [previous RealWorldHealthCare.org article](#), I described the emotionally and physically burdensome aspects of cancer, for the patient. But what can easily be overlooked are the enormous challenges for caregivers, who may be at [increased risk of depression, anxiety, and sleep and cardiac disorders](#), as well as [higher blood pressure and reduced immune function](#).

Unless the caregiver is either a survivor or mental health professional, supporting another through bona fide trauma may exceed one's emotional capacities. The patient's psychological responses, let alone physical challenges, might often feel like "too much." Caregivers' ongoing recommitment to their own health—including sufficient sleep, regular exercise, healthy diet, and stress-management approaches—may attenuate the enormous strain of caring for someone with breast (or other) cancer. The family caring for me during my treatment was not always so diligent when in taking care of themselves, and even through my own required focus on my own healing, I was keenly aware of the resultant wear on them.

The justifiable focus on the patient may steer caregivers to ignore seeking psycho-emotional support of their own; but doing so puts them [at risk for clinical levels of distress](#). Counselling or peer groups can play a key role in alleviating emotional burdens unique to those in supportive roles. (Local chapters of Gilda's Club, and its now umbrella [Cancer Support Community](#), offer caregiver options globally.)

I didn't join a support group until years after my initial diagnosis. Retrospectively, I would have done so from the very start of my own "cancer journey", in part to gain support for myself, but also to lighten the challenges on my support team. Caregivers would do well to encourage patients/survivors to join dedicated support communities also, to expand the patient's helping network.

Since patient supporters genuinely want their efforts to be effective, it may be useful to be aware of needs identified by breast cancer patients. From an informal, small survey of survivors, I identified some common themes caregivers may not always think of:

- Financial assistance. [Out-of-pocket costs alone may exceed \\$700 monthly](#) for cancer patients—even for those with insurance. A fundraising campaign through Facebook or other social media site can help alleviate an enormous burden that significantly compounds breast cancer-related stress.
- Physical company and gently supportive dialogue. Cancer organizations offer guidance about [how to communicate with a survivor/patient](#), including things *not* to say.
- Assistance with appointments and tasks, including filing and organizing of medical records and insurance forms. [Lotsa Helping Hands](#) or Google calendars can help volunteers coordinate assistive tasks across the patient's care giving network.

Several cancer organizations outline [additional tips](#) about how to truly be there for a breast cancer patient. While it may seem obvious, the often-overlooked well-being of caregivers is also of paramount importance— both to sustain themselves during

prolonged periods of giving aid, as well as promote the healing of all affected by the challenges of breast, or any other, cancer.

Are you in need of assistance with cancer treatment costs? [Several copay foundations](#) make funds available to offset copay expenses for cancer patients.

Have you ever been a direct caregiver for a cancer patient? Were you aware that not only cancer patients, but also their caregivers are at increased risk for clinically relevant levels of distress? Tell your story or share your thoughts in the comments section below.

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