

Men Are Affected, Too, And Have a Role to Play

Although October -- designated as Breast Cancer Awareness month -- is over, think back about the messages you received recently about the disease. There are women telling other women to perform breast self-examinations; there are interviews about women survivors; and there is information about women banding together to help other women cope. The few times I have seen a man enter the breast cancer scene is when a corporate or sports figure addresses efforts at raising money for overall awareness for breast cancer programs.

While the women in our lives may succumb to cancer's physical manifestations, men are deeply affected by its emotional and psychological challenges. The feelings I experienced when my wife, Barbara, was diagnosed with the disease in February -- helplessness, fear, anger, and uncertainty -- are similar to what other men and women have felt. Yet women, with their more extensive communication networks, have a venue for developing a support system. Men are often just set adrift. And even though, according to the Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, it is estimated that 1,500 men will be diagnosed and 400 men will die of breast cancer this year, it is still considered a women's disease.

Let's face it, since men really are from Mars, we are very ill-equipped to handle the emotional and spiritual workload that quickly gets dumped on us. We can certainly "do stuff," but sometimes men just can't "read" what a woman wants and needs. Women want to gather information and talk about it over and over again. Men figure that they've talked about it already: "We're done, right?" This can easily translate into "I don't care" or worse.

After weeks of discussing the possibility of breast cancer and its recent confirmation, for example, my wife and I were off to a Saturday evening wine and cheese party with friends. Her mission was to talk with two members of the group who were involved in medicine. My intent was a temporary break from the ongoing discussions. It was the only time during our cancer crisis that we had a major argument.

Barbara and I really did work together to conquer the disease, however. We researched together, discussed the possible findings and outcomes together and made many visits to doctors' offices together. And since her successful surgery, we have worked hard to get our lives back to a sense of normalcy together. I have met many men who also collaborated with their partner or significant other in fighting cancer. According to cancer survivor Kay Alport, president of Bosom

Buddies, a Chicago-based breast cancer support organization, "part of this is recognizing that 'normal' is now different than it was before."

Yet within the scope of togetherness, I (and other men I have spoken with) experienced some very real male emotions and feelings. At the time of initial diagnosis and surgery, these are not necessarily the types of things one can share with a partner who is fighting for her life. In fact, losing one's wife jumps immediately to the top of the list of male fears. But not far behind are feelings of inadequacy (how can I fix it; what do I need to do to get control of the situation; when will things get back to normal?) and anger (why her?).

Until I watched the home video "Partners in Hope," produced by Bosom Buddies earlier this year, I had not seen any male-female teams talking about how they survived the disease together. This video changed that. Created as a byproduct of an earlier female-oriented video, it focused on men.

I wouldn't have known about this video without having discovered Men Against Breast Cancer. MABC is the first national nonprofit designed to target and mobilize men to be active participants in the fight to eradicate breast cancer and to help men provide support for the women in their lives. Marc Heyison and Steve Peck founded the organization.

And we wouldn't have discovered MABC without a visit to Carolyn Hendricks, a Bethesda-based oncologist, a few weeks before my wife's surgery. She had a Men Against Breast Cancer sign posted in her office. She saw the helplessness of men who accompanied their wives to her office.

I saw the same at a breast-cancer awareness session for men at Inova Fairfax Hospital in late October. Men Against Breast Cancer were cosponsors of that day's program. But only a few of the 20 men shared their thoughts and concerns; most sat in silence.

While women can talk and research well, men "need a road map." Matt Loscalzo, director of patient and family services at Johns Hopkins Oncology Center, notes that such a document doesn't exist, and that each situation is different.

But, with enough generalizations, such a road map is possible. Peck and Loscalzo are working to create one, and in fact MABC hopes to provide a wallet-size card describing the "10 things men need to do" in such circumstances. While many of these relate directly to the breast cancer situation, many can actually help men be better partners throughout their lives.

So guys, here are a few ideas to get you started (the list is a work in progress). They are primarily focused on a husband-wife relationship.

- Take charge, take control, don't be helpless.
- Be sure you don't overpower her; communicate on her terms; learn how to communicate better (and that includes just listening).
- If she wants, handle making the appointments, finding out test results, etc.
- Make dinner, clean the house, take care of the kids.
- You married this woman "for better or for worse." This means that you need to show her your unconditional love at the start and end of each day. Squeeze as many hugs as you can into your waking hours. She needs to know she is still a desirable woman.



- Stay on target and stay together throughout diagnosis, surgery and treatment, as needed.
- Laughter is the best medicine -- Barbara and I made lots of jokes about her situation. Our favorite was my telling her to "get her ducts in order." One woman even named her replacement breasts. Humor also lightens the mood of family and friends and makes them better able to provide support.

Another organization is the Virginia-based Men's Crusade Against Breast Cancer. Founded by Bernie Smith, the husband of a breast cancer victim, it has pushed for statewide recognition that breast cancer is a family disease. He has several legislative proclamations already to support this.

With such a growing number of people bent on making breast cancer more than a woman's disease, the future may well hold a time in which it is removed from the role it holds today. Perhaps the horrifying statistic that one in eight women will be diagnosed with it can be replaced by a much smaller ratio.

Until that day, the words of Paul Forbes, a man who has just entered the breast cancer world (his wife recently had surgery), holds incredible promise. Forbes shared this with me at the Inova session: "Not my wife alone, but we, a couple, will survive breast cancer."

Here are a few resources for men:

- Bosom Buddies www.bosombuddies.org  877-245-1300
- Men Against Breast Cancer www.menagainstbreastcancer.com 
- Men's Crusade Against Breast Cancer: 703-978-3336.

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