TALKING TO YOUR LOVED ONES
About Your Metastatic Breast Cancer Diagnosis
Receiving a diagnosis of metastatic breast cancer (MBC) can be overwhelming, not only for you, but also for your friends and relatives who may not know what it means or what to say to show their support. In addition to feeling sad and uncomfortable, your loved ones may find it difficult to talk to you out of fear of upsetting you or of saying the wrong thing. However, talking to them about your diagnosis is an important part of helping them understand what it means for your daily life, as they can be a vital source of support along your MBC journey. This information is meant to help you and your loved ones talk about your MBC diagnosis, so that together, you can address the challenges of living with this disease.

**ADJUSTING TO YOUR MBC DIAGNOSIS**

Normal reactions to an MBC diagnosis are feelings of sadness, anger and/or fear. As you learn more about your disease and the available treatment options you are likely to experience many different emotions. Physical and chemical changes related to treatment or to MBC can also affect your emotions. It’s OK to allow yourself to experience emotion, as this may help you better manage the disease.

You should also express your feelings to family and friends as you feel comfortable. Many people believe that expressing sadness, anger or fear is a sign of weakness. However, the opposite is often true. For many people with cancer, talking to family and friends can be a source of comfort and an effective way of coping. Acknowledging your feelings also makes it possible for your friends and family to admit to similar feelings, enabling you to support each other.

**DISCLOSING YOUR ILLNESS**

Receiving a diagnosis of MBC raises many questions about what type of information should be shared and with whom. Only you can decide when to talk to your friends and family about your diagnosis. For many people, talking with friends and family members may help them better cope with their disease while for others, they may effectively cope by revealing less information about their health status. It is important to structure sharing information as you are most comfortable to manage emotions and expectations of others while also maintaining control of the discussion. There are no rules about whom to talk to, or when to share information. You may find you are most comfortable breaking the news to your spouse or partner first, followed by other family members and close friends.

The following tips can help you decide whom you want to talk to about your diagnosis, when to share information and how much information to share:

- Make a list of people that you want to talk to in person
- Ask a loved one or friend to be with you when you share the news
- Set the stage by creating an environment where you are comfortable talking, i.e., in your home or other private location
- Decide how much information you would like to share during the discussion and set expectations for others regarding what type of information you are comfortable sharing and how often
- Set expectations regarding how you would like others to handle your diagnosis, i.e., if they are free to share with friends or if you wish for them not to discuss specific details regarding your MBC journey
TALKING TO YOUR FAMILY ABOUT YOUR MBC DIAGNOSIS

A cancer diagnosis affects the entire family, not just the person who has the disease. Therefore, you should consider how much you want to share with family and close friends regarding your diagnosis and cancer care.

Once you’ve told your family about your diagnosis, you should also take the time to discuss changes to family routines. It’s appropriate to let them know where you may need help with tasks you once handled yourself. Creating an opportunity for open communication can help you and your family make decisions as a team and work together to handle the changes to your family life. At the same time, you and your family should continue participating in enjoyable activities you did before your diagnosis.

Your family might respond to your diagnosis by trying to “protect” you from upsetting news or events. Acting as if everything is OK can lead to tension and confusion within the family. If you see such “protective” behavior in your family, gently inform them that “protecting” you makes you feel isolated and you would like to continue to be involved in family discussions. Communicating clearly with your family about how you feel, both physically and emotionally, will help them better understand what you’re going through and enable them to provide the support you need.

Even with the support of your family and friends, you may find it difficult to manage your frustrations and emotions. While such feelings may be unexpected, they are common responses to a major life change. It’s best for you and your family to be honest with each other about what you’re all feeling and work together to utilize effective coping strategies such as seeking information about MBC, how to plan for the emotional challenges that will occur during the course of MBC and accepting the diagnosis. Employing coping strategies that help you understand the diagnosis while also recognizing the demands the illness (ie, change of individual responsibilities, consistent doctor appointments, and/or unpredictable health status that can impact daily activities) will have on the entire family may ease some of your feelings of guilt and frustration.

It is important to remember that people react differently to the stress of a cancer diagnosis. Keep in mind since your family and friends will also be emotionally impacted by your diagnosis, each person may employ different types of coping strategies to help themselves. Some people are more comfortable using active coping including: seeking social support, accepting the diagnosis, seeking information about the disease and planning how to handle emotions and physical challenges. On the other hand, others may be more comfortable using avoidant coping such as denial of the diagnosis or thinking there will be a cure, behavioral disengagement or spending more time on other activities, and avoiding discussions of the topic. While no one coping method is correct, the family dynamic can determine which strategies will help the patient and family most effectively. Therefore, it is important to be able to talk to your family about similarities and differences in individual coping styles. Although this may be difficult, it will help you understand each other and ultimately work together.
TALKING TO YOUR LOVED ONES

TALKING TO YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT YOUR MBC DIAGNOSIS

If there are young children in your family, you may be worried about how they'll react to the news of your diagnosis. A child’s reaction to a cancer diagnosis often depends on how the adults in their lives are handling the situation. It is important to decide in advance how to talk to young children about your MBC diagnosis.

While it’s natural for adults to want to shield their children from their own fears and worries, that may not be in the children’s best interest. Children often overhear adults discussing subjects not meant for them, even when they don’t appear to be listening, and often pick up on their parents’ worry and anxiety.

The first step in talking to a young child is to arrange a quiet time when you won’t be disturbed. If you have more than one child, talking to them individually can help you tailor the information to each child’s level of understanding, and will provide you an opportunity to address how each child responds. Some children may not have any questions during the discussion, but you should encourage them to ask questions at any time.

It is most helpful to give young children truthful information that they can understand by sharing small amounts of information over time and answering their questions in a way that is appropriate. Young children (up to age 8) do not need detailed information, but older children (ages 8-12) and teenagers may want to know more. Regardless of their age, all children should have the following basic information:

- The name of the cancer (ie, breast cancer)
- Where the cancer is
- Where do you go for treatment and what happens
- How you may feel during treatment and/or physical changes that may occur (eg, fatigue, weight changes, hair loss, vomiting)
- How their lives may be affected

Be prepared to address children’s questions and worries about your cancer. When a parent gets sick, children often feel guilty and think they’re to blame. Don’t expect your children to tell you this or instead, reassure them that your cancer is no one’s fault. Your children may also worry that your cancer is contagious and that they or your spouse can catch it. You should try to correct these ideas before the child has a chance to worry.

Some children may become very upset when learning about a parent’s cancer diagnosis, while others may not. You should aim to give your child a balanced point of view and acknowledge cancer is a serious disease but you have a team of healthcare professionals helping you. Choose a time when you are feeling fairly calm to talk to your children. In a 2-parent household, it’s a good idea for parents to talk to their children together. If you are a single parent, consider asking an adult relative or friend who is a stable, consistent influence in your child’s life to be present if you’re feeling nervous about the talk. It’s OK for children to cry, and to see you cry, if you are emotional. It’s also OK to admit to your children this is an upsetting time, cancer is a scary disease and it’s normal to have strong feelings about it.

Provide a safe and secure environment for your child to cope with your diagnosis. While you may be tempted to reassure your children that everything will be fine, it is best to refrain from this language as metastatic breast cancer is unpredictable. The most important issue for children of any age is their own sense of security and safety. You can help your children cope by reassuring them that no matter what, you will always love them and they will always be cared for. You should also prepare them for changes to the family’s routine. But despite all the upheaval, you should reassure your children that you and your spouse/partner and/or other family members/friends will be there to support each other through this difficult time. When you take the time to explain changes in family routines, you send a powerful message that Mom or Dad is still in charge and your child’s needs have not been forgotten.
ASKING FOR—AND ACCEPTING—HELP FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Allowing your loved ones to help can be an important way for them to cope with your disease. One of the first questions you may get from a friend or family member is, “What can I do to help?” You may be tempted to say, “Oh, nothing right now. We’re fine.” Maybe you don’t really know what you need, value your privacy, or feel you have all you can handle without having more people around you. However, most people really do want to help. Allowing your loved ones to help and support you makes them feel they’re part of your life.

Be as specific as possible about the kind of help you need. For example, tell your friends or relatives when you need a ride to the doctor, or find out if they can help with housecleaning, yard work, child care, or grocery shopping. Even if you do not know what you need, share this information as it will give your loved ones a chance to offer something they can do for you.

Don’t be surprised if some people don’t offer to help. They may not be able to help because they have problems of their own, they don’t know how to help you or are afraid due to a past experience.

If you are comfortable, consider encouraging your loved ones to talk to you about how they’re feeling so you can work through your feelings together. However, if you’re not ready to hear about how they feel, it’s OK not to ask. It can be hard enough to manage your treatment and deal with how you feel, but do keep in mind they are also experiencing a variety of emotions.

Sometimes you may not want to accept help from others, talk about your feelings or ask how others feel. It’s OK not to accept help all the time or to decline a discussion, in a nice way, regarding your illness. This allows you to set your own boundaries about when and under what circumstances you would like help and are willing to discuss your illness.

WHAT TO AVOID

While there are many things you can do to make it easier to talk to friends and family about your MBC diagnosis, there are a few things you may want to avoid:

• Don’t ignore or neglect a friend or relative who may need to open up and talk with you. This may cause them to think you do not care about them.
• Don’t ignore your own need to talk with someone. It’s healthy to want to share how you feel. Always remember you are not a burden to your loved ones.
• Don’t set up a false front, or a “happy face,” if you don’t really feel that way. While you might want to protect your loved ones by acting as cheerful as possible, it is more helpful if you share your true feelings so they can provide the support you need.
• Don’t feel that there is a perfect way to talk or handle your interactions with others. You will find that there are times when you want to talk and other times when you feel that communication is not going very well. Realize that you—and others—are doing the best you can.