

# TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Out-Patient Clinic - 100 Old Billerica Road, Bedford MA 01730

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## FINDING WAYS TO GIVE COMFORT AND SUPPORT

by Barbara Chenoweth, NP

If you've ever had a serious illness or even an illness that is not life-threatening, it can be hard to decide how much to share with other people and how much to keep inside. Some people have said that they hesitate to go out among people for fear that they will need to answer questions about their health. Or worse, face advice from well-meaning friends who advise them about what they should or shouldn't do. Some friends are quick to share their own experiences and offer what worked or didn't work in their own situations. This kind of advice is rarely helpful.

Sharing personal health information can become a dilemma for those with serious illnesses. On one hand, when one shares personal information, the sharing allows friends to offer support and caring. It can open communication and create the possibilities for deeper relationships. On the other hand, a person must be prepared for the responses of other people.

People who have received a new diagnosis of cancer often are concerned about how other people will react. Unfortunately, they often receive unhelpful comments like stories about friends who had the same kind of cancer...and died. Or their friends give advice about

what to do, what treatments are best, in their opinion, and where to find the best medical care. As one woman said, "I had close friends who were all problem-solvers and they would have been giving me advice when I needed to figure it out myself," (CURE, Summer 2008).

Other people, faced with serious illnesses, do not wish to "burden" their families or friends. Some people who have diseases that are in the "wait and watch" stage may choose not to share the ups and downs of monitoring their illness until they have an active state of disease. Late-stage disease also may prompt silence. Most people fear that they will be treated differently.

Not sharing such an important part of one's life does create problems. It creates a barrier in relationships. It prevents other people from "rising to the occasion" and providing needed help and support. When only a few members of the family or close friends are in on the truth of an illness, they too miss out on support from the other family members or friends who are unaware. Holding back emotional information creates its own emotional stress.

An ill person who conceals an illness cannot fully explain why they feel tired or grumpy. Sharing with important people can ease the burden of concealment and allow for honest communication about what the other person could  
(Over)

(*cont.*) do to be supportive. It actually can give an ill person more control, in a situation that often feels out of control.

For friends and family of those with serious illnesses, several suggestions were outlined in an article, *How to React to the News*, CURE, June 2008:

- Keep it simple and say something like “I’m really sorry. I would like to be there to support you.”
- Ask how they are doing. Make it clear that you are willing to listen.
- Don’t be hurt if the person says “I’d rather not go into it today.”
- Avoid making comparisons to other people with the same diagnosis that you may know.
- Offer specific help and don’t promise anything that you really cannot do.
- Follow up and ask how the person is doing, keeping the channels of communication open.

If your friend or family member has a serious illness, the best gift you can give is the gift of listening. Listening without giving advice or false reassurance takes practice. It’s often not comfortable to simply listen to another person’s fears and sadness. Nor is it comfortable to sit in silence when there are no words that will change a difficult situation. Our natural inclination is to try to help, to talk and reassure or to deny that it’s really that bad. Comfort and support come from being fully present by listening and by remaining silent.

Like everything, there also is a time and place for laughter and lightness. People with serious illnesses do not need to always be serious.

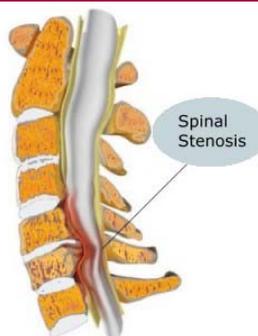
Beyond being listened to and being understood, as important as these gifts may be, being treated as a normal person is often an unspoken hope. People with cancer say repeatedly, “I am not just my cancer.”

Keeping a seriously ill person part of the lives and events of friends and family gives comfort and support. In the end, words are much less important than supportive acts of understanding and kindness.

## COMING ATTRACTION



On Wednesday, March 28th, Cherie Asgeirsson, RD, LDN, will give a talk on **“Weight Loss: Truth vs. Mystery.”** The presentation begins at 10:30 a.m. in the Auditorium Center.



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