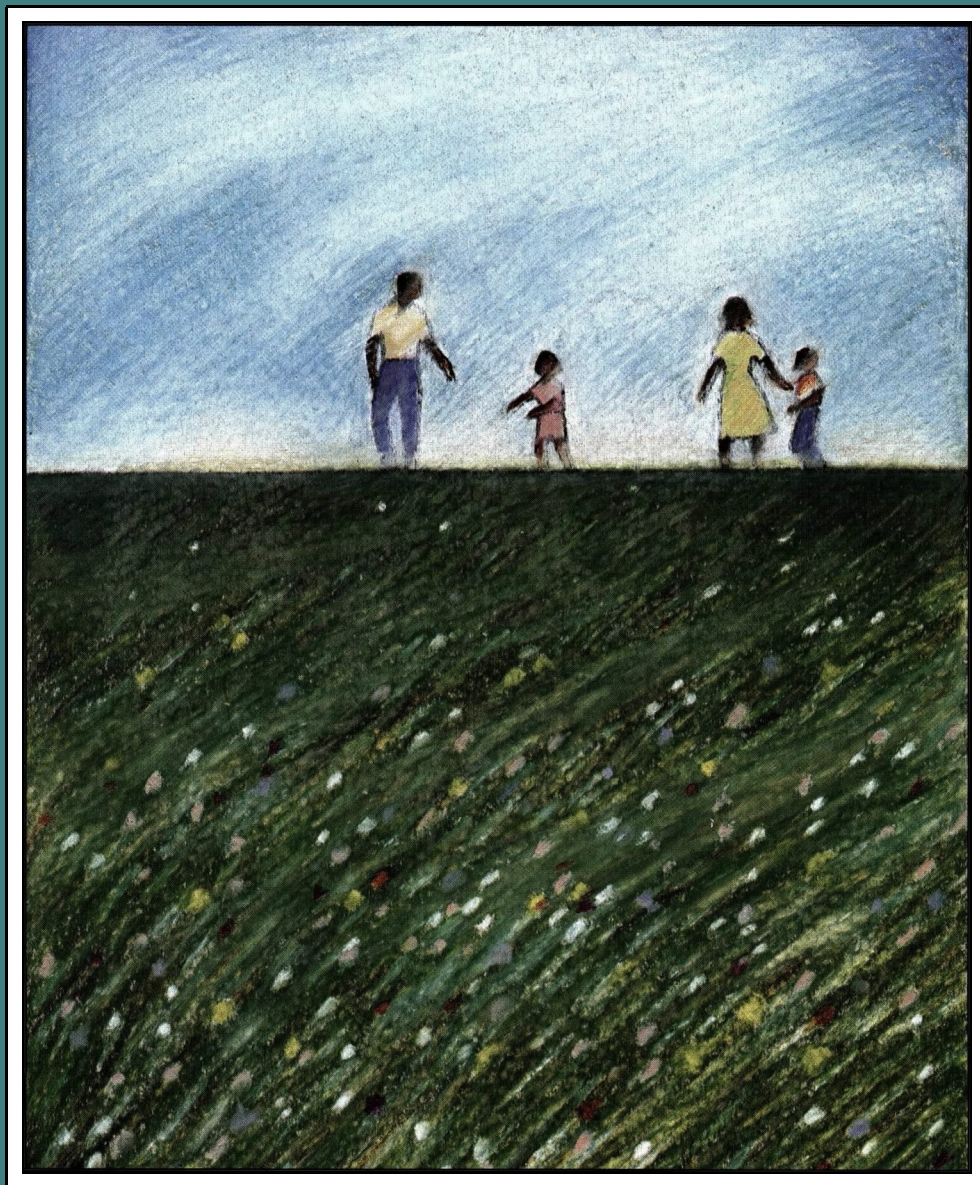


Taking Time

SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH CANCER
AND THE PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THEM



NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
National Cancer Institute

Introduction

“**A** diagnosis of cancer . . . is a powerful stimulus against procrastinating on warm and kindly or beautiful things . . . a reminder that many of the material things aren’t all that urgent after all . . . Take time to watch the sunset with someone you love; there may not be another as lovely for the two of you.”

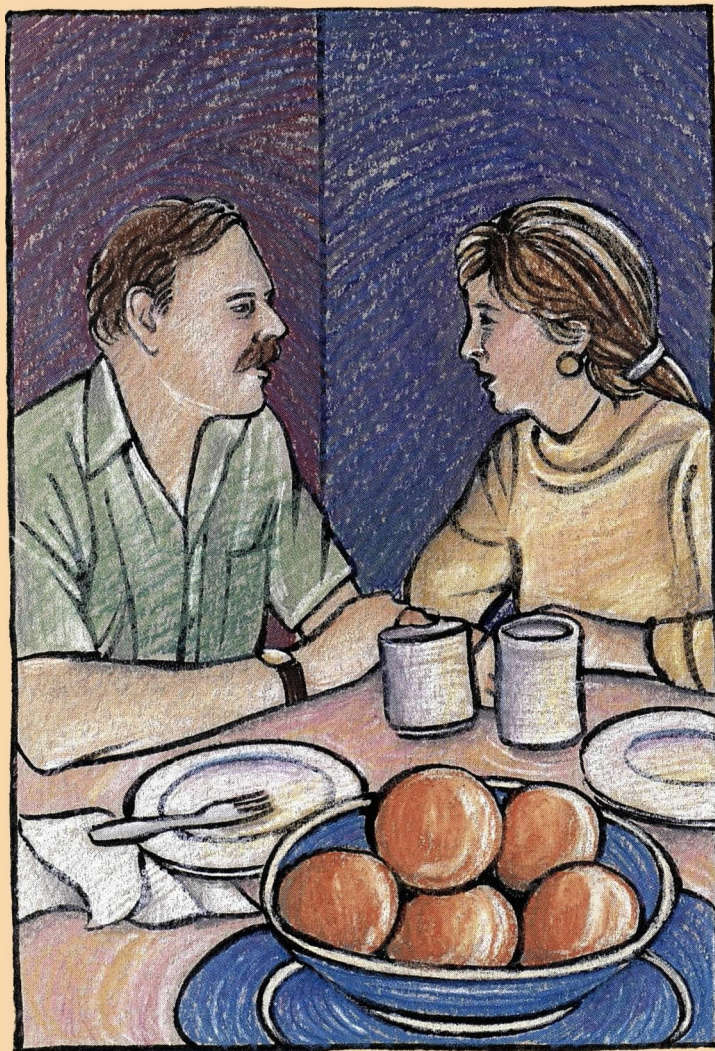
These are the thoughts of a woman with cancer who needed to share her feelings with someone who would care and who could understand.

This book is written for those affected by cancer: you, someone in your family or someone very close to you. We wrote this book because, as another person described it, we often feel that “we share a common bond that only victims of cancer know, the feelings of anguish and the loneliness no one else can share.”

We’ve used letters, conversations, books and articles from, with, and by cancer patients, families and friends. The observations of professionals who work with cancer patients as expressed in conferences, seminars, and journals also have been explored. Our main emphasis, though, is on what the people who live with cancer in their own lives and their own homes think, feel, and do to cope with the disease.

No two people with cancer are alike as are no two relatives or friends of people with cancer. Although the material in this book is intended to be helpful, some sections may not apply to certain circumstances; a few might suggest responses that make you feel uncomfortable. Each person has to cope with cancer in an individual way. What follows is intended as a guide: a brief look at how some people with cancer and their loved ones feel and the ways they found to deal with those feelings.

Sharing the Diagnosis



■ Cancer can be unutterably lonely. No one should try to bear it alone.

■ Patient, family, and friends usually learn the diagnosis sooner or later. Most people find it easier for all if everybody can share their feelings instead of hiding them. This frees people to offer each other support.

■ Patients usually agree that hiding the diagnosis from them denies them the right to make important choices about their life and their treatment.

■ Families say patients who try to keep the diagnosis secret rob loved ones of the chance to express that love and to offer help and support.

■ Family members and intimate friends also bear great emotional burdens and should be able to share them openly with each other and the patient.

■ Even children should be told. They sense when something is amiss, and they may imagine a situation worse than it really is.

■ The patient might want to tell the children directly, or it may be easier to have a close friend or loving relative do so.

■ The children's ages and emotional maturity should be a guide in deciding how much to tell. The goal is to let children express their feelings and ask questions about the cancer.

■ By sharing the diagnosis, patient, family, and friends build foundations of mutual understanding and trust.

One question many people ask after diagnosis is, “Should I tell?” Perhaps not. A family member could be too old, too young, or too emotionally fragile to accept the diagnosis, but people are surprisingly resilient. Most find ways to deal with the reality of illness and the possibility of death- even when it involves those they love most. They find the strength to bounce back from situations that seem to cause unbearable grief.

The way in which people differ is in the speed with which they bounce back. The diagnosis of cancer hits most of us with a wave of shock, of fright, of denial. Each person needs a different amount of time to pull himself or herself together and to deal with the reality of cancer. In reading the sections that follow, you should remember that only you really know your emotional timetable. Think about sharing at a time when you are ready to do so.

Should You Tell?

Usually, family and close friends learn sooner or later that you have cancer. Most people with cancer have found the best choice is to share the diagnosis and to give those closest to them the opportunity to offer their support. They have found it easier, in the long run, to confide their fears and hopes rather than trying to hide them. Of course, you must use the words and timing that you find comfortable to tell family and friends that you have cancer. We will talk more about that in the next chapter.

If you have no family, it is especially true that the road appears less lonely when shared with a few close friends. You might lose one or two. Some people will find it too difficult to talk with you or to be around you, and they will slip away. On the other hand, you may discover hidden strengths and compassion in the least likely of companions.