

Scott Blair: Coping with cancer in your relationship. This is Stay Happily Married, episode number 296.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott Blair: I'm Scott Blair, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Is a life-threatening diagnosis endangering your relationship? Life-threatening disease and illnesses are never easy to cope with in any circumstance. When these illnesses come into your life, you are faced with the possibility of not surviving the sickness. Not only are you dealing with the unknown, but you have the doctor's visits and medical bills to deal with.

When you have to go to several follow-ups to see the progression or regression of the illness, you are having to take time off from work. When you take time off from work, you aren't receiving as much income as you were before. With the increasing medical expenses, this income is important to be able to pay off these debts. These effects of the illness can put stress not only on yourself, but onto your loved ones as well. What can we do to move forward in our relationships when our loved one is dealing with a life-threatening illness?

Earning her doctorate degree in clinical psychology, Dr. Gina LaFrazza is founder and owner of Gina LaFrazza, Psy.D, PLLC. Dr. LaFrazza is a licensed psychologist with over ten years of experience in various subfields of psychology. She works with individuals, couples, and families across the lifespan, providing therapy and comprehensive psychological and educational assessments.

Dr. LaFrazza has a range of experience stemming from her work in a variety of settings. She has conducted assessments in one of the top hospitals in the nation for rehabilitation of traumatic brain injury, provided therapy in college counseling centers such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and provided various service in private practice. Dr. LaFrazza is a member of the North Carolina Psychological Association. Welcome to the show, Gina. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Thanks for having me, Scott.

Scott Blair: Well, Gina, you're here to talk to us today about how cancer diagnosis affects couples. And I'm sure that this is a pretty huge topic because I'm sure every one of us knows someone that cancer has affected and affected their family. So could you maybe provide a little bit of insight to start out with about how big this issue is and how important this issue is?

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Absolutely, Scott, and thanks again for letting me talk about this today. Actually, I do a lot of work with individuals and couples who are battling various types of cancer. I see clients in all different stages of diagnosis and disease progression, and this is actually an increasingly common issue for which couples seek help.

So first, I just want to give you a sense of how pervasive cancer is, to kind of put it in perspective. That's the numbers I can share with you. On January 1st of 2012, there were

approximately 13.7 million Americans living who had had a history of cancer. In this year alone, we expect over one and a half million new cancer cases to be diagnosed, and over half a million Americans are expected to die of cancer. And that's just this year.

As you may know, cancer is the second most common cause of death in the U.S. Only heart disease is ahead of it. But despite these somber numbers, many people don't really think of cancer as a health crisis for an entire family, but it really, really is. It affects the entire system and creates many, many unique issues for couples. And I know we're going to get more into that.

Scott Blair: Yeah. Let's just go ahead and move into that, then. What are some of the problems that you see that couples are experiencing in their relationship when one of them is diagnosed with cancer?

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Well, as you said earlier, Scott, in your introduction, there's of course the stress associated, which is having a life-threatening illness. I mean, first and foremost, I see a lot of fear and grief in couples I work with, as one might expect. And these issues are huge and challenge a couple to support each other in ways they may never have had to before.

But beyond this most obvious impact, though, cancer also impacts couples in some unique ways. Battling a serious illness often changes a partner's role in a relationship. So for example, a partner who previously provided the lion's share of the child care, took care of the home, they may not be up to those tasks during treatment. Similarly, a breadwinner may not be able to work.

So this drastically changes the financial climate in the family system, and this is at a time when medical expenses are perhaps higher than ever. Roles in the family will almost certainly change for both the patient and the partner. And beyond just the logistics of who does what in the family system, many people will feel a loss of identity as their role and their identity is shifting.

Another big way that couples are impacted is the issue of sex. Cancer significantly impacts a couple's sex life. Many people just feel awful during treatment, to put it simply, and they may not be interested in any kind of sexual activity with their partner. Some types of treatment can leave men impotent. Partners can feel rejected or unfulfilled. And then, for example, you may have partners dealing with a mastectomy, where both people end up just not feeling very sexual after a procedure like that.

And then related to a couple's sex life, there's often the issue of infertility that comes up. Both men and women deal with infertility as a result of cancer treatment at times. This, of course, impacts family planning, and there can be some grief associated with not being able to have a child or more children. And this can be even more complicated when couples are in the early stages of a relationship and faced with cancer. Cancer treatment for these young couples can speed up having to make a decision about children or having children together.

Because we have advances in fertility treatments, young couples diagnosed with cancer have options available to them, such as freezing sperm or eggs or embryos prior to going through treatment. But of course, each of these options has certain implications for the future of the couple, so they have to come together and make some decisions perhaps earlier than they

normally would have regarding family planning. And this, of course, is an additional layer of stress on top of the disease they're coping with. And then -- we've touched on this a little bit -- finances are another huge issue for couples, and it invariably causes financial stress. There are office visits, drugs, imaging. The medical fees alone can cost into the thousands of dollars.

And then there are related expenses that couples endure, such as things like having a wig when they're going through chemotherapy or additional child care that may be needed, or even just gassing up the car to go see specialists who they may need to be seeing for their care. And this can sometimes coincide with someone's inability to work or earn money, so money can be tight. And of course, money is one of the common issues that couples can fight about or argue about even in the absence of cancer.

And then one last impact that I want to mention because I think it's pretty important is that couples will often feel like cancer consumes their relationship. I hear this over and over from couples with whom I work. Whereas a couple may have previously talked about work or kids or hobbies or dreams that they may have, now they find that every conversation is about the next test or the next treatment or the next test result, how they felt that day. And many times, partners can begin to grieve the relationship they used to have. And in some cases, this even leads to an emotional or physical affair with someone outside of the marriage, and of course, that can complicate matters.

Scott Blair: Yeah. We both touched on in the beginning how widespread this is, the numbers of cancer, and I said that probably all of us know somebody that's been affected by it. But going through that list, I just have never really thought about . . . I mean, it's enough that somebody would have cancer, but to have all those other issues that could compound to be on your plate as well. That's just almost overwhelming to think about. Have you observed any trends among couples having issues in the relationship because of the cancer diagnosis?

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Well, I typically see cancer bringing couples either closer together or further apart. In some cases, a longer term partnership may have an advantage, in terms of their ability to come together and face the health crisis. So that's a bit of a trend. Couples who have been together longer typically have more experience facing stressors, overcoming obstacles together, working as a team. I think in the case where couples struggle more and move further apart, the additional stressor on the relationship, though, may actually be intensifying issues or a dynamic that already exists. And this can certainly be independent of how long a couple has been together.

So in other words, if a marriage has problems -- for example, poor communication -- during times of health, these problems can become worse when the couple is faced with cancer, or any other crisis, for that matter. Overall though, I think it's important to remember the stress of cancer is often so great, as you pointed out. There are so many issues really that people don't think of that even the strongest relationships are tested in some way.

Scott Blair: Sure. I can imagine. So what do you suggest that couples do to strengthen and improve their relationship when one of the partners has been diagnosed with cancer?

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Well, first and foremost, I think it's important the person going through the cancer, the patient, needs to be able to make their own decisions about their bodies and their treatment. Input from partners is certainly important and almost always wanted by the patient, but individuals who are going through the treatment often lose enough independence throughout the course of their battle. The last thing they want is their partner making decisions for them.

So a well-meaning partner may feel put off by this idea, but I believe it's important for the couple to establish at the outset how they're going to discuss major decisions, how to give and receive input, ultimately to allow the patient to choose what's right for him or her. On an emotional level, I think couples need to be able to communicate feelings of sadness, grief, anything else that may be coming up for them, and to be able to talk about that openly and without fear of judgment or hurting the other's feelings. Both partners are going through an incredibly stressful experience, and they each need an outlet.

So while it's important for couples to talk about these feelings with each other, it can also be so overwhelming for a couple that it's helpful to utilize outside resources too, like a therapist or a support group, or even friends. And it's a balance, really, because couples need to be open and share with one another. But again, remember, as I said earlier, it's not good if every conversation becomes about cancer or the treatment. So couples still need to talk about other topics as well and find a balance between the two.

I also suggest couples make time to talk specifically about logistics and expectations for one another. And I think this is particularly important when it comes to the finances, as we've mentioned, and changing roles in the family system. So for example, if a patient expects their partner to come to every chemotherapy appointment, they need to explicitly express this desire. Their partner may feel that he or she is being supportive by picking up an extra shift instead to cover expenses.

So a conversation can just lead to a better understanding of each other's needs, wishes, and intentions, and then together they can make a decision about what makes the most sense. But nobody has expectations that the other one doesn't know about.

Scott Blair: Well, let's continue down this path, if you don't mind, a little bit. I'd like to drill down a little deeper, because, like I said earlier, there are a lot of things that could be overwhelming, put on a couple's plate, when having to deal with this. So what kind of specific items do you recommend to couples when you're working with them that would really help them to resolve some of the negative issues that are going to be coming up?

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Well, I mean, as I said again and not to be redundant, but couples just need to talk to one another. This is the main thing that they can be doing to have a good outcome. They need to talk about how they feel. They need to talk about how cancer is impacting their sexual and emotional relationship. They need to talk about the day to day concerns. During cancer, they need to communicate better than they ever have.

Even before they see communication as a problem, it's often helpful for a couple to meet with a couples therapist who's familiar with the stresses related to cancer. So based on their experience,

he or she can help the couple to proactively talk through common issues, and they can also help identify potentially problematic communication styles that the couple may already be engaged in.

Another suggestion I often give couples has to do with their roles in the treatment process. I think it's a really good idea to define roles and to have a game plan at the beginning, so for every doctor's appointment, every treatment session, you know who's responsible for what.

Sometimes when someone's going through cancer, the amount of information they get can be so overwhelming it's yet another stress that we haven't mentioned yet. But couples should decide ahead of time whose job it is to write down information they receive, to write down doctor's instructions. They should decide on who is going to ask the questions, who's going to follow up with the medical team for more information when it's needed. That way, this is all clear, and they feel kind of like a well-oiled machine going to each appointment and going through the process together.

Scott Blair: Well, when couples approach the cancer diagnosis in this way, with this preparation, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and the interaction of the relationship, perhaps compared to a couple who doesn't?

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Well, as I said, there are no two ways about it. Battling cancer is a stressor on any partnership, and it's not anything any partnership wants to go through. But despite the prognosis, couples can often become closer by dealing with an existential crisis such as cancer. Surviving couples often tell me they feel a greater sense of connection with one another, a greater sense of trust in their partner, that their partner is going to be there through thick and thin. And even couples who face a terminal diagnosis are able to say things to one another and have experiences with one another and achieve a greater level of intimacy by approaching cancer in the ways that we've discussed.

Scott Blair: Well, it's going to be no surprise that I'm sure this episode is going to be a very popular one and a very sought-out one. So kind of in a way of parting, is there anything else that you can think of that you would really like to express to our listeners, and you think they should know?

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Sure. I think it's important to remember just how cumbersome and overwhelming cancer can be. And no one is going to go through the process perfectly and get it 100% right. But I do think it's important for couples to remember they can really benefit from using all the supports and resources that are available to them, starting right at the time of diagnosis, going all the way through outcome and resolution.

They should consider couples counseling to talk through emotions, including end of life and grief issues. They should talk with financial planners who have expertise in working with families dealing with major medical issues, and they should make use of support groups for patients and caregivers, and friends and family as well. So really, they should just take advantage of all the resources that are available in their community.

Scott Blair: Well, Gina, this has been really insightful and helpful. Thank you so much for talking with us today and being on the show.

Dr. Gina LaFrazza: Any time. Thank you, Scott.

Scott Blair: To find out more about Dr. Gina LaFrazza and her practice, Gina LaFrazza, Psy.D, PLLC, you can visit their website at www.drlafrazza.com or call 919-747-1531 for an appointment.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at stayhappilymarried.com. I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, stay happily married.

Announcer: Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please email us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at 919-256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.