Tips for facilitating a Couples Facing Cancer® Support Group

We believe a group is the most powerful format for couples to learn and be successful during this journey with cancer. A group allows couples that are experiencing the journey to share the joys, sorrows, fears, successes, and failures that they are all living through.

The book, *Love is a Journey: Couples Facing Cancer* by Jan Latona, Ph.D. and Gary J. Stricklin, Ph.D. forms the backdrop for the Couples Facing Cancer support groups. It would be important for the leaders to have read the book, and to provide or encourage the group participants to get a copy. See information in this website for obtaining the book.

- Group leaders can be counselors, a couple or an individual who have lived through the cancer journey, or an individual or couple who have an interest. The main job of the facilitator is to provide the gathering time and place for the couples, to steer the conversation to stay on topic, and to stay out of the way as the couples learn from each other and share their hearts.

- Starting a group takes some effort in letting the community know that the group is available. This includes placing brochures in hospitals, oncology offices, and getting on the lists of support groups or community resources.

- Couples Facing Cancer® groups are truly support groups and not therapy groups. Very often the participants may also be in individual or couple therapy also. The group leader should have a list of counseling resources they might refer the participant to should they need therapy. This often occurs if an individual is managing severe depression, anxiety or other mental health issues. A couple may be best served by receiving couple’s therapy if they have great conflict that has nothing to do with the cancer. The CFC group provides a forum to support and problem solve about the impact of cancer and it’s treatment, but should not take on trying to fix situations that need a focused approach by a professional counselor. The CFC group can easily be a very important adjunct to other counseling.

- The group leader(s) should interview a couple before including them into a group. This is a chance to learn about them, to tell them about the group process and to allow each to decide if they are a good match for the group format, or if it would be more helpful to assist them in finding other resources. It is a time to tell them that they are always free to try the group and not stay if it is not helpful for them.

- We recommend no more than 4 or 5 couples in addition to the facilitator. That provides enough input, while giving everyone a chance to be heard.

- Groups should be limited to couples only. Sometimes one spouse will want to attend to talk about their couple issues. This is not a good idea for the couple or for the group. Once and a while an individual may need to attend alone, because their partner cannot attend that session, that’s okay. Just not as an ongoing practice.

By Jan Latona, Ph.D. & Gary J. Stricklin, Ph.D.
www.couplesfacingcancer.com
• It works just fine to have a group that is a mix of ages, types of cancer, hetero and homo sexual couples, and different family constellations (couples who have kids, no kids, etc.). Couples issues are the main focus, and these other differences add to the particular circumstances, but not the issues.

• A format that works well is to let the topics of the evening arise from the couples. The group does not need to have speakers or assigned topics. There is so much going on in these couples’ lives that the topics can flow from their experiences that occur between group sessions. Often couples will ask if they are going to learn about treatments or research. Once they understand that this is a place to process what they are experiencing rather that telling them things, they appreciate the opportunity.

• Format consists in starting out with a go-round or check-in, giving each person the time they need to tell about what has been happening for them. The job of the group leader is to continually ask about the impact of anything that has been said on the couple. This is probably the most challenging task for the leader. The patients very naturally want to debrief about their latest treatment challenges and physical changes. There has to be time and respect for this, followed by gentle nudging to ask about the impact on the couples relationship.

• Equal time should be given for spouse check in. It’s not uncommon for the patients to command the floor time sharing their experiences and new treatment information. Spouses need to be asked to check-in also. Sometimes they may want to tell about events in their life other than ones about cancer, and it’s important to encourage them to talk about how it relates to their couple’s cancer experience.

• There is no “right” way for a couple to face cancer. It is not the facilitators job to try to teach them to act in a certain way. Some couples will argue their way through the whole thing, and maybe that gives them the strength they need. The burden on the group is not to make the couple happy, but to give them a place to talk, and to problem solve. Again, if they are unhappy by their way of interacting the facilitator might offer to give them the name of a counselor.

• The groups are a place of open and intense emotions. It provides a place where the couple can express what they think and feel and know that they will be understood by others. There should be no judging about what someone feels. The group sessions can be filled with raucous laughter, bitter tears, angry outbursts; all are fair game.

• The group leader needs to be comfortable with people dying, and to know that the group has given them quality of life. This perspective can be imparted to the participants.

• The group leader also needs to be comfortable with talking about life and death, allowing the participants to talk about it from the perspective that makes sense to that person, from whatever their spiritual or logical perspective. Intense emotions are often part of these discussions, and individuals in this truly important life situation may have little patience for platitudes or reassurances. They are speaking from their deepest most intimate heart and soul place.

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