And In Health: A Seriously Funny Look at Coping with Cancer as a Couple Dan Shapiro, Ph.D. Penn State College of Medicine

In the beginning:

- 1) Cancer is happening to all of you
- 2) Express love directly
- 3) Recognize that health systems are complex
 - a. Partners may need to learn assertiveness
- 4) In decisions, the patient gets to decide if the doc is a match
- 5) Get good at being a team with docs
- 6) Decide as a team how much and what you will share with docs
- 7) Remember: waiting stinks. Do not adopt a ferret while waiting.
- 8) You are going to make rookie mistakes
 - a. With role changes, 2 supportive phrases for every correction
 - b. Especially make sure rookies in the kitchen are safe
- 9) Unless you are the last human defending the universe, work less
- 10) There are a thousand ways to freak yourself out on the internet
- 11) If you are of reproductive age, preserve fertility
- 12) Remember: you are almost definitely more resilient than you realize

Dealing with emotions

- 1) Men: Don't just do something, sit there!
- 2) Refresh listening skills: Validate, state the emotion, avoid flurry activity
- 3) No grandma's wisdom: speak up, silent treatment during cancer is bad
- 4) Focus on now after you have a plan: the big picture will freak you out. You can't cope with everything all at once. One bit at a time.
- 5) Rehearsing bad outcomes doesn't protect you if things go badly. It just makes you miserable.
- 6) Remember: we all get chemo PMS, cancer treatment can induce wild mood swings. Try to avoid expressing anger
- 7) The phrases "fine" and "whatever" mean you need to talk about something
- 8) Share your fears (a little)
- 9) During treatment remember that complications do not mean that death is near: everyone has some unexpected complications
- 10)Stop fighting over how your spouse is thinking about cancer, there is no one right way to cope. Survivor optimism is helpful: This is the attitude that bad things may happen, but if they happen, we'll cope one at a time.
- 11) You are going to be stressed, be careful with what you choose to cope with that stress: unhealthy ways can include alcohol, food, sex, gambling, spending, and rage

Be close

1) Have a weekly date night

- 2) Have a weekly business meeting
- 3) Wherever possible, simplify your life and reduce home stress
- 4) Turn off the bickering
- 5) Exercise together
- 6) Deal with chemo-brain proactively
 - a. Quit multi-tasking
 - b. Ask for help
 - c. Write stuff down
 - d. Slow down: check for keys, purse, wallet, cancer notebook
 - e. Chill on self-abuse for lack of memory
- 7) Learn to be more flexible with sexuality (remember the stickleback fish)
 - a. Talk about sexuality
 - b. Most couples have sex well into their 70's and ½ into 80's
- 8) If you can't have sex physically, don't lose closeness too
- 9) Listen to the cosmic "wake up call." Storm chasers?

Navigate outside relationships

- 1) Work together to get what you need from outside people
- 2) Sometimes we need to clear out relationships that have been causing stress in our marriages
- 3) Explore social networking (Facebook, caring bridge etc)
- 4) Don't fear support groups
- 5) Be prepared with an answer to the question: Let me know if I can help!

Dependence and scary stuff

- 1) For patients, make peace with dependence, but not too much!
- 2) If you feel guilty because your spouse is taking care of you, do not take it out on them!
- 3) There is such a thing as too much dependence. If you don't absolutely need to do everything for your spouse, don't.
- 4) Deal with the pressure following treatment of "It's over! Be normal immediately!"
- 5) Complete advance directives together
- 6) Have the "What if" conversations at the end of life
- 7) If you can think, you can love!

Shapiro's talk is more fully explored in his book, <u>And In Health, A Guide For Couples Facing Cancer Together</u> (Trumpeter, distributed by Random House). May 14, 2013.

http://www.amazon.com/And-Health-Couples-Facing-Together/dp/161180017X