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# Coping with Cancer

## The Challenges Men Face

**LISA M. WENGER** Men are often described as reluctant help-seekers. This broad characterization is, in part, reflected in research highlighting men's relatively lower rates of medical services use for physical or mental health symptoms. However, as researchers examine men's help-seeking, the picture becomes far more complex, particularly in the context of diagnosed illness. When faced with evidence of disease, hesitancy around clinical engagement is often set aside as men recognize that medical care is necessary and responsible.

Interested in how men navigate help-seeking after a cancer diagnosis, the author met with 30 men diagnosed with a variety of cancers. Over these interviews, patterns emerged that provided insight into how men manage cancer's challenges, including physical impacts, role disruptions, relational strains and emotional struggles.

Consistent with research describing serious or chronic illness as a "biographical disruption," the men detailed how cancer threatened a familiar self, including a way of life defined by strength, independence and the ability to serve as a productive force in their families, workplaces and communities. In response to these threats, many of the men engaged two aligned, yet distinct, strategies for accessing support: help-seeking with a strong back and help-seeking with a soft front. (*The metaphor of strong backs/soft fronts comes from the work of Buddhist teacher and anthropologist Roshi Joan Halifax.*)

The first process (*strong backs*) focused on resisting loss and change as men built their cognitive and physical resources through information gathering and lifestyle shifts. Drawing on a variety of supports, including clinicians and cancer peers, men in relationships often enlisted partners and, sometimes, adult children in efforts to learn about their disease and make dietary- or fitness-related shifts. Recognizing their family as people who cared about them and who were a

natural part of this experience, these help requests were often indirect. Additionally, many men noted how family proactively offered support; the men often did not need to request this help.

The second process of help-seeking (*soft fronts*) tended to be more challenging. Focused on acknowledging and adapting to enduring changes levelled by cancer, men often described struggles to solicit help to work through their distress and make sense of their "new normal." Many turned to partners for assistance, describing how they had "few secrets" from each other. However, some men feared that the intensity of their emotional pain might be too much for loved ones or worried that family members were ill-equipped to provide necessary help. Likewise, family members could struggle to offer support. As the men described, some family appeared uncomfortable with emotion-focused discussions and/or emphasized the need for the men to "fight" or stay "tough." These dynamics complicated already difficult conversations about sadness, fear and loss. In this context, some men turned to friends, therapists or cancer peers, valuing the distance or common experience, while others tried to manage their struggles alone.

Both strong backs and soft fronts have value. However, for men in Western society, masculine expectations of control, self-reliance and emotional reservation can emphasize the former and complicate the latter, a challenge emphasized by cultural narratives of cancer as a "battle." As evident in this research, as these dynamics play out in the context of the family, there are important implications for how men work with loved ones to manage the challenges of cancer.

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