

My wife has breast cancer...

The psychological impact of breast cancer on women is now widely recognised. But what about the men struggling to find ways to support their partners and adapt to a new reality? **María Valerio Sáinz**, health reporter for the web edition of the Spanish daily *El Mundo*, asked some of them to share their stories. The piece, which won her a Best Cancer Reporter Award, is republished below.

What do I say to her? How should I behave towards her? When will we be able to start having sex again? Husbands and partners of women with cancer are full of doubts and fears. In their own way, they too, indirectly, are victims of the disease.

As psychologist Francisco Montesinos, of the Spanish Association Against Cancer (AECC), explains, the way to live with a cancer diagnosis depends on many factors, including the type of tumour and its prognosis, the psychological resources and personality of each individual, and the state of the couple's relationship prior to diagnosis.

"In my experience the man often suffers as much or more than his wife, because mechanisms of identification with his partner's suffering come into play," this specialist explains. "Women have greater psychological resources for dealing with physical pain, and are more able to adapt," he adds. "Men usually get more depressed."

Félix, who is now 52 years old, remembers his wife's diagnosis 17 years ago as a very strange feeling. "Life becomes a blur, you cannot see anything. We were returning from Madrid to Valdepeñas, where we lived,



María Valerio

after hearing the news, and I had to stop the car because I couldn't drive. I couldn't see anything."

His wife Josefa had a relapse five years after the first tumour appeared, and this has coloured his relationship with the disease ever since. "Psychologists now tell me that cancer has got too much of a hold in my head," he admits. "It changes your life, it turns everything upside down. You are always afraid."

CHANGING ROLES

It falls to the men to play the part of carer traditionally held in the family by women, explains Montesinos, and not all men find it easy to adjust to this new role. Advocacy groups admit that no exact figures are available, but say that all too many couples break up during the course of the disease.

According to this psychologist, in some cases age is a decisive factor; and changes in the behaviour of younger men, who are more affected by the woman's illness, are increasingly being reported at consultations. "Relationships are more flexible now, more egalitarian," he points out, "and communication between the two sides plays a very important role."



Not all partners affected by cancer are prepared to ask for help, to recognise that they too are suffering. Many men tend to avoid sharing their feelings with the patient so as not to worry her, and in the end she notices. “It is best to share the burden of cancer between both partners.”

And talk – talk a lot. About fear, sex, treatments, the daily shopping, the children, etc. Psychologists agree that communication between partners is fundamental for the woman to feel that her diagnosis is something shared. But Félix, for example, doesn't much like talking about the subject. “She likes being part of a patient group with other women suffering from breast cancer, but I find it pernicious to spend all day going over it,” he confesses.

Even at the time she had the cancer, he didn't want to know too much. “What is the point? What I wanted was to live each day as it came.”

LOSING A BREAST

“For me losing a breast wasn't traumatic, nor was breast reconstruction, which she says she did for me,” says this lawyer from Valdepeñas. He still remembers when he saw the scar just a few days after the opera-

tion. “I kissed it and put my hand on it. It didn't affect me at all. We made love.”

However, away from home Félix felt rejection towards other women. “I saw a low neckline and looked the other way.” His mind, he says, put up defences by making “that” appear all the same to him. “The solution was that I became completely indifferent to other women's breasts”. Looking back, he admits that if he could do it again, he would ask for the psychological help that he didn't have at the time. “It would mean that the disease would affect me less.”

He is not the only one. Breast cancer impacts on both men and women. One area where it impacts most is on sex, particularly when the breast has to be completely removed. While women are more

inclined to tackle their worries and problems of self-esteem following mutilating surgery, many husbands are afraid. Women often interpret this fear as a lack of interest, but often it actually reflects the man's fear of hurting or offending her.

“In the workshops and psychological consultations that we have at the AECC, we stress that sexuality relates to the whole body, not just one part,” says Montesinos. Despite this, he admits that many people have their own personal mental blocks, “and this increases when breast cancer is involved. Sexuality is a subject about which the Spanish still have much to learn.”

Psychologists also encourage carers to give themselves space to do other things – the cancer shouldn't occupy all of their time. “That doesn't mean that they are going to forget about the disease,” notes the AECC specialist, “but it is important for them not to completely abandon everything they were doing before.” Spending time with friends, reading or sport can be excellent safety valves for releasing tension.

Félix chose to lose himself in his work – “At least that's what my family says. And I suppose that they are right.” It is a month since they went for the latest check-up. Everything is still fine.

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“It’s not easy to find a balance between being there while not overwhelming her”

NOT THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

“When you hear about cancer, the first thing you think of is death,” says Roberto, from Santander, who has been married to María Jesús for more than 30 years. There had been several previous cases of this disease in their families when they learned of the diagnosis for the first time: infiltrating intraductal carcinoma of the right breast.

Surgery, chemotherapy, more than forty sessions of radiotherapy. The treatment bore fruit and the oncologist finally wrote on her report “complete remission”, after five years had elapsed without any sign of the disease. “One month later we were in a mess again,” remembers Roberto. The cancer reappeared in March 2006, this time in both breasts, requiring bilateral radical mastectomy.

STILL THE SAME WOMAN

That is a moment few men forget. Roberto preferred not to see the wound in the hospital, “I would have plenty of time afterwards, I thought.” That moment arrived at home, while dressing the wound. “The truth is that mutilation is not the most important thing by a long way, when life is at stake.” There are still two scars, he stresses, and it will be she who has to decide whether or not to have reconstructive surgery.

Francisco still remembers his wife showing him the 41 stitches that she had in place of her breast at home. “It was a very hard blow, but I told myself, ‘Paco,

you have to pluck up courage.” Antonio agrees with him. “The world falls around your ears. Anybody who doesn’t go through this doesn’t know what it is like.”

But they all agree that “she was still the same woman”. More important than physical appearance or sex (“it’s not the right time”), is affection. “I had never said ‘I love you’ so many times,” jokes Roberto. “I hope I wasn’t too lovey-dovey, but it just came out naturally.” As Antonio says, it’s not easy to find a balance between “being there while not overwhelming her”.

SWITCHING OFF

Being together and with their 26-year-old son was the best ‘couple’s therapy’ for Roberto and María Jesús. “Reading our books together, listening to the radio or strolling along the beach when she was feeling strong.” In addition, try not to miss out on your daily exercise, swimming and going for a walk every month (“more necessary than eating”).

Experts not only recommend getting out, but they encourage couples to keep open safety valves throughout the disease. “It is important, because it lasts a long time,” admits Roberto.

Because they also suffer the emotional burden of the diagnosis. This man from Santander experienced ‘advance mourning’ at the start of this year, when his wife spent a week in hospital in a very serious condition. “It seems it is much harder for us men to open up than it is for women; but at that time I was overwhelmed with grief.” Perhaps he wouldn’t have asked for professional help, but a psychologist friend helped him to let it all out.

He spent nearly two months off work, with pills to help him sleep, and free time to spend with his wife. After that “body blow”, and thanks to family help keeping the household running, he understood that it affected him. He became a househusband without any difficulty – well, except for the ironing – “But you don’t have to be able to do everything,” he laughs.

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