

UW-Health: Cancer psychologist talks about how patients discuss diagnosis with others

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MADISON, Wis. – Receiving a cancer diagnosis is often one of the hardest days in a person's life, and talking about it with family, friends or colleagues can be a complicated process to navigate.

It's also difficult to learn of a loved one's cancer, and whether it is a dear friend or a celebrity, it can sometimes be a shock to learn about it well after a diagnosis. An expert at UW Carbone Cancer Center breaks down why some patients with cancer might choose to keep their diagnosis to themselves and how patients – and those who care about them – can navigate those conversations.

Erin Costanzo, psychologist at UW Carbone's Cancer Psychology Clinic, reminds her patients that health information is ultimately private, and how and when an individual shares it is unique to each person.

"Some patients find comfort and community in talking about cancer with friends and family," she said. "Others feel burdened by the conversations about diagnoses, prognoses and treatments and prefer to focus on other subjects."

Sometimes it isn't about how the patient feels, according to Costanzo, but rather that the patient doesn't want to upset or worry their loved ones.

"It's common to be reluctant to tell one's children or parents, for example," she said. "People can be afraid of how hard others will take the news, but our loved ones are resilient. They can absorb difficult news and I advise my patients to share their experience with those closest to them."

In fact, Costanzo highlights the benefits that can come from communication about cancer.

“Your loved ones can become advocates for research and resources for cancer patients,” she said. “They can become your allies on your journey and your support system, and there is evidence that these connections improve a cancer patient’s mental health and even their health outcomes.”

Her advice to patients is to talk about the diagnosis in their own time and in their own words. She tells her patients that sharing the news in an email or on social media can enable a person to share information with a large group at one time if individual conversations are challenging. She also advises patients to share their needs with their loved ones.

“If you need to talk about your journey or how you’re feeling, don’t be afraid to do that,” she said. “If you prefer to distract yourself with other topics or don’t wish to dwell on it, let that be known too.”

For family and friends of patients with cancer, Costanzo has some basic tips as well.

“Show support, but follow the person’s lead,” she said. “Don’t be offended if they didn’t share the news right away or don’t feel like talking about it, and don’t talk about their diagnosis or care with others without their consent.”