

# Learning about Conflict

Information for people living with cancer and  
their family caregivers

## The EPEC™ Project

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# What is Conflict?

A conflict is a disagreement in which we feel a threat to our needs, interests, or concerns. Conflicts can arise due to misunderstandings, differences in beliefs or ideas, lack of communication, and personal factors.

For example, you may not agree with your doctor's treatment plan or you may feel that you are not receiving enough information. Conflict can also involve your family or friends. They may, for example, become upset if they have concerns and feel they are not being heard.

These situations can put strain on personal relationships or relationships with your healthcare team. Even small conflicts can escalate if not addressed as they arise. It is important to be proactive in preventing and dealing with conflict in order to keep channels of communication open and to receive the best care possible. In this brochure, you will learn about the types of conflict that can happen between you, your caregiver and your healthcare team.

This brochure will teach you about:

- ▶ Preventing conflict
- ▶ Handling conflict when it occurs
- ▶ Dealing with conflict that cannot be avoided

## ▶ **American Cancer Society**

Toll-free: 1-800-ACS-2345

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

An information specialist can answer your questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They can also help you find support groups in your area. The website also has information on talking with your doctor.

## ▶ **National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship (NCCS)**

Toll-free: 1-877-622-7937

[www.canceradvocacy.org](http://www.canceradvocacy.org)

As the oldest survivor-led advocacy organization, NCCS is a highly respected authentic voice at the Federal level, advocating for quality cancer care for all Americans and empowering cancer survivors. You can also find information about communicating with your doctor and building a healthcare team on the NCCS website.

## **Additional Resources**

*The Intelligent Patient's Guide to the Doctor-Patient Relationship, Learning to Talk So Your Doctor Will Listen*, by Barbara M. Korsch, Caroline Harding (1997, Oxford)

## Resources

The following resources can help

► **National Cancer Institute – Cancer Information Service**

Toll-free: 1-800-4-CANCER or 1-800-422-6237

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

You can speak with staff who can explain medical information in easy-to-understand terms. The website also includes multiple resources on coping with cancer.

► **Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF)**

Toll-free: 1-866-235-7205

[www.livestrong.org/cancersupport](http://www.livestrong.org/cancersupport)

At the LAF website you can read topics about talking to your doctor and order a free **LIVESTRONG™** Guidebook. You can also call **LIVESTRONG™** SurvivorCare, which can provide you, your family, friends and caregiver with information, education, counseling services and referrals to other resources. They will also help with financial, employment or insurance issues. You can also speak to a case manager Monday - Friday from 9am – 5pm EST.

## Preventing conflict

Many conflicts can be avoided by early and open communication. It is important for your healthcare team and loved ones to understand your needs, goals and concerns.

Here are some important things to keep in mind:

► **Be honest with yourself and others**

Take time to consider your own needs, goals, and concerns. Documenting these for yourself can help you speak openly about a range of needs and concerns.

When you tell your healthcare team and loved ones how you are feeling, be sure the things you are saying reflect your real concerns. This is the only way to make sure that they know how you really feel. Many conflicts can be avoided when you are honest and all information is shared. Tell your healthcare team or loved ones if there are things that are harder for you to talk about. It may be helpful to talk with other people living with cancer about strategies for talking with your healthcare team and loved ones.

► **Tell your family and healthcare team your goals and wishes**

Conflict can happen when your healthcare team and family do not understand your goals or wishes. Tell your doctor and family your goals. These goals may include your treatment, work, favorite activities or an event you would like to attend. Ask your healthcare providers, caregiver and family to help you decide on goals and the type of care you want to receive. If a treatment is suggested that conflicts with your goals, you can tell your healthcare team specifically what treatments you do or do not want and can also ask for alternatives. Your healthcare team should work with you to meet your specific goals and can help communicate your wishes to your loved ones.

If the conflict involves a loved one, this can be particularly upsetting. It is important to remember your own feelings and medical goals. Remind your loved one about your medical goals. Be sure your doctor understands your goals and wishes, and that you have the final say on all decisions. It may also be helpful to see a counselor, spiritual advisor or other third party to help you communicate with your loved one and to reach an understanding.



you, let them know how you feel and ask questions until you have a better understanding. Some people feel uncomfortable asking their healthcare team questions. Many people find it helpful to take a family member or friend to healthcare visits to help them ask these important questions.

► **Disagreement over your medical goals or wishes**

Sometimes during an illness, people have different thoughts of what the next steps in medical care should be. To help avoid these disagreements, tell your healthcare team and family your wishes. Discuss what treatment or end-of-life care plan is best for you. Your goals may change as your illness changes so it is important to talk with your healthcare team and family if your wishes change.

## Dealing with unavoidable conflict

Conflict can be unavoidable if a member of your healthcare team is not honoring your treatment goals or respecting you. You have the right to talk to as many doctors as you need to until you find the right one for you. You also have the right to deny, postpone, or accept any treatment option. It is your body. You get to decide.

► **Be clear when you talk to your caregiver or healthcare team**

Conflict may occur when you, your caregiver, or members of your healthcare team do not understand each other.

Here are some ways you can prevent misunderstandings:

○ **Ask questions if you do not understand your doctor**

A doctor may use terms that you do not understand. If this happens, ask your doctor to explain them to you in a different way. Do not leave your visit without a clear understanding of your illness and treatment plan.

○ **Use clear terms**

Sometimes, a survivor or caregiver will ask a doctor to “do everything” to treat a patient. These terms may mean something different to you, your family, and your healthcare team. To the doctor, “everything” may mean all conventional treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery. You may mean alternative or complementary treatments such as herbs, acupuncture, meditation, and joining a support group. If you suspect that you and your healthcare team are not on the same page ask what

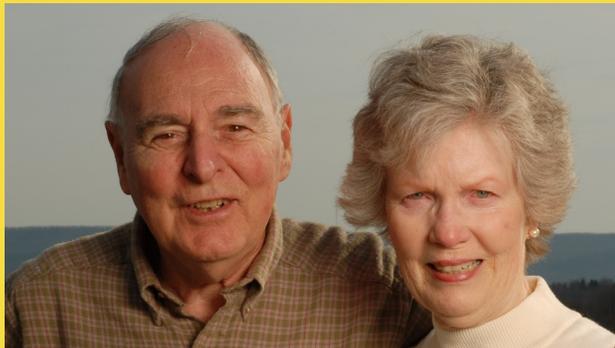
they mean when they use certain phrases.

When you suspect a misunderstanding, refer back to your specific medical goals when talking to your healthcare team about treatment options. This will direct your healthcare team towards the best treatment plan for you.

- **Create clear roles for your caregiver and healthcare team**

Your caregiver, family and friends often provide support and help with daily tasks. They may go with you to your appointments and help you talk with your doctor.

Your healthcare team wants to respect your privacy and may be worried about sharing information with people other than you. If you would like certain people to be informed about your medical care make sure your doctor knows their role and how much information that person should be told about your health.



## Handling conflict when it occurs

Sometimes conflict cannot be prevented.

A common reaction to conflict is to stop communicating with that individual. When it comes to your medical care and day to day support, this lack of communication can harm your overall medical care and emotional well-being. Even in conflict situations, it is important to continue having honest and clear communication. This can prevent a small misunderstanding from becoming a big conflict.

Here are some causes of conflict and ways to deal with each:

- ▶ **Differences in faith or religion**

Tell your healthcare team if you have faith beliefs that could affect your treatment plan. Your doctor should respect your beliefs. They may be able to make changes to your treatment plan to honor these beliefs. It may be helpful to bring a spiritual advisor with you to help explain your beliefs and practices.

- ▶ **Unclear diagnosis or prognosis**

It is not always possible for your doctor to know what will happen next. You may become frustrated when the doctor does not give you the answers you want. If you feel like your healthcare team is not sharing everything with