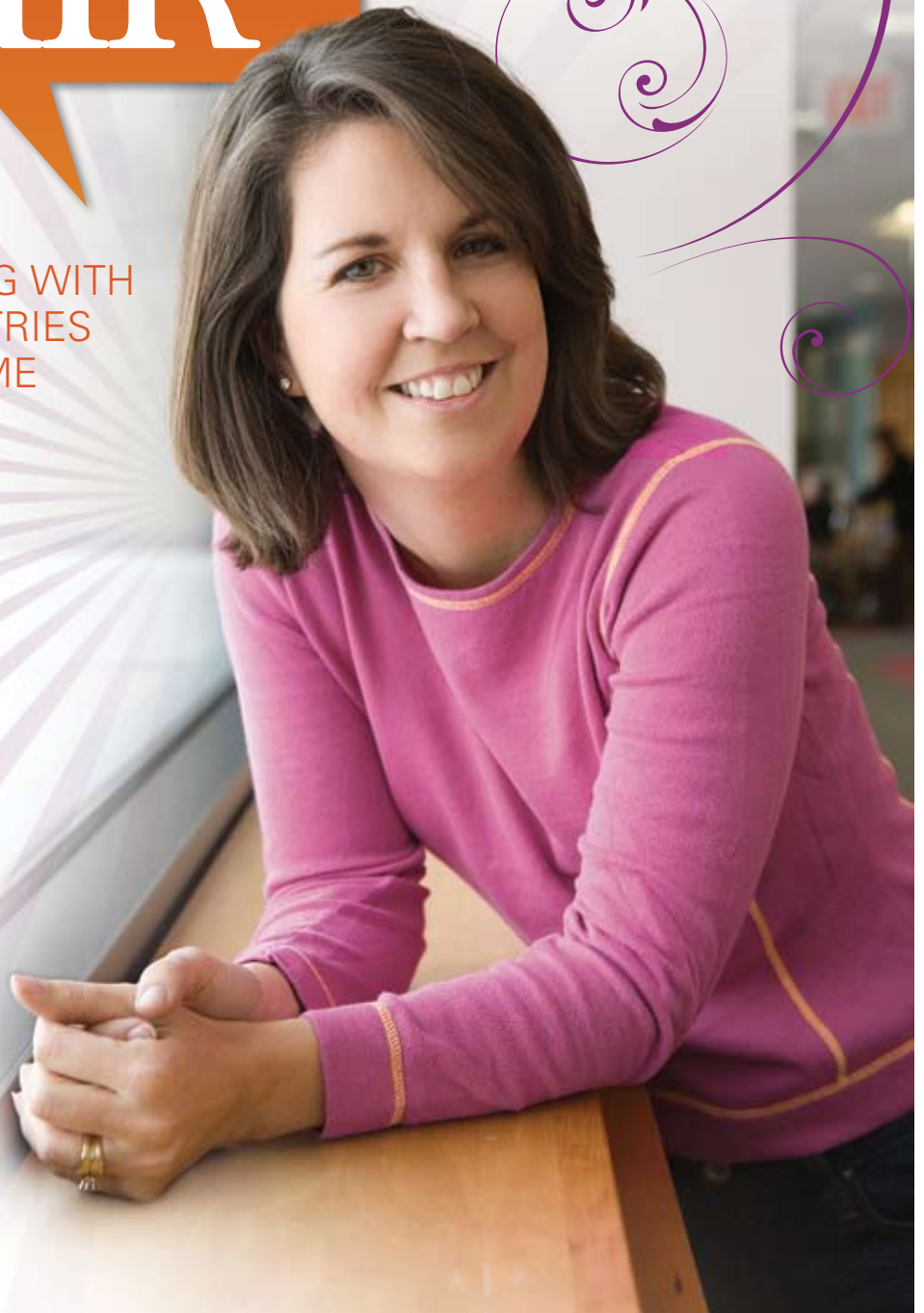


Learning to Talk

8 TIPS FOR COPING WITH
SOCIAL PLEASANTRIES
IN A DIFFICULT TIME



Heather Jose, author of "Letters to Sydney," offers tips for talking with people about their diagnosis.

IT'S PART OF OUR PURITAN HERITAGE: WE JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO TALK ABOUT THE BAD STUFF IN LIFE. IT'S EASIER TO KEEP MUM THAN TO EXPRESS COMPASSION. OFTEN, WHEN SOME PEOPLE TRY TO EXPRESS CONCERN, THEY END UP BLATHERING ON INCONSIDERATELY ABOUT REALLY AWFUL STUFF—LIKE HOW FRIGHTENED YOU MIGHT BE OR A GREAT-UNCLE WHO DIED OF CANCER.

We've assembled some tips to help keep your conversations with friends and acquaintances out of the weeds.

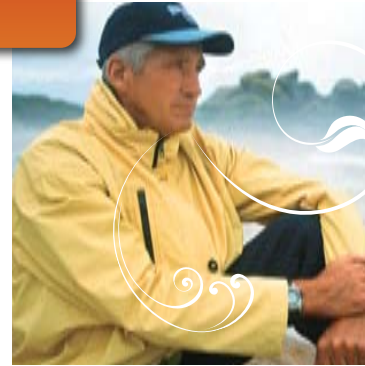
1 Be prepared.



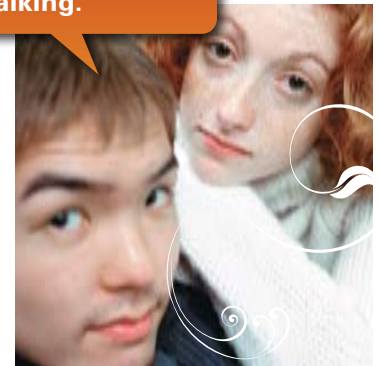
You know the questions will come. What's more important is how you will answer them. Think about what you're comfortable talking about and with whom. Take time to discuss your feelings with your closest family and friends so you're all on the same wavelength. Consider developing some standard replies so that you don't have to figure out what's appropriate each time someone new asks you a question.

2 Center yourself.

People react to the way you present information almost as much as to the information you present. Take time to get your own attitude toward cancer in order. Heather Jose, a nine-year survivor of stage IV breast cancer, used nutrition, exercise, visualization and prayer to complement the treatment she received at the U-M Cancer Center. Jose's mantra is "Everyday I am killing cancer," which is also the subtitle to her 2004 memoir, "Letters to Sydney." By adopting that kind of attitude, it helps others to take a positive approach as well.



4 Let someone else do the talking.



Regardless of how positive your outlook, the flood of questions can be exhausting. Jose suggests appointing close friends or family members as spokespeople for you. Ask them to send out periodic updates to the circles of friends they know so you don't have to repeat every new development. Or, consider a Web site, like Care Pages. Available through the U-M Cancer Center, this free Web site allows you to set up a page to post updates that people can access on a password-protected basis.

3 Learn to change the subject.



If someone starts prattling on about something insensitive or inappropriate, don't hesitate to cut them off. Being direct doesn't mean you're rude. Chris Henrickson, a Cancer Center social worker, suggests you say something like, "Thanks for your concern, but that's not something I really want to discuss." Then ask a question about a completely different topic to get the conversation moving in another direction. If you can't redirect the discussion, walk away.



5 Don't apologize for your needs.

You are in charge of your own experience, and it's OK to have emotional needs, Henrickson said. If someone says something insensitive, such as "You're overreacting," make the choice whether it's healthier to distance yourself from that person or to try to clue the person in. Don't waste time on people who drain your energy.



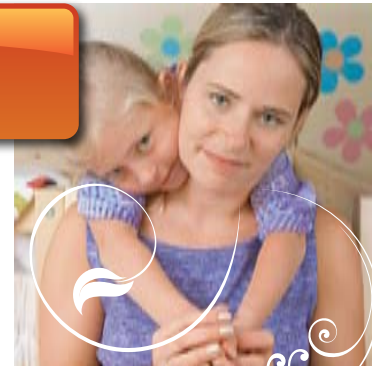
7 Keep a sense of humor.



Everyone can't be in on the joke, but especially with close family, friends and other survivors, find space for a little humor. Jose said she and her husband couldn't stop laughing after her stem-cell transplant because she spent an entire day training to try to stand up for two minutes. "People walking by probably thought it was the psych ward," she said. "Humor can be really helpful if you have the right people around."

6 Show your strength.

In an effort to be helpful, sometimes people can take it too far. For Jose, it was frustrating when well-intentioned friends would try to carry her child for her because they thought she was too weak. Politely refuse any help that you feel is overstepping and let people know you are still capable of doing a lot, even if it's not as much as before.



8 Look for new relationships.



At some point, you may find that you and your family have more in common with other families affected by cancer. Seek out new friends via support groups and online forums to provide an outlet for thoughts and feelings that other people can't understand. Most people have different circles of friends and family; think of this as an addition to your social sphere, rather than a replacement.



For more resources, including links to Jose's Web site and Care Pages, please visit mccancer.org/thrive.