

# If Your Mom has Cancer

I sometimes hear from middle-aged friends who tell me that their mother (or father) was just diagnosed with cancer. They then launch into their plans for her treatment.

This is when I ask, “What does your mom want?”

This question is usually met by a 4 or 5 second pause, followed by a hesitant, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, what does your mom want? Have you asked her?”

You'd be surprised how often mom hasn't been asked.

In some cases, adult children want mom to have the most aggressive treatment possible even if that treatment is unlikely to be effective.

In other cases, children want to take their mother across the country to the world's expert on her disease when the mother would be more comfortable staying with the surgeon who took out her gallbladder 10 years ago.

I've known people to assume that older women diagnosed with breast cancer don't mind losing their breasts. Anyone who makes that kind of assumption about me is guaranteed to lose a body part of their own. (For the record, if I'm diagnosed with prostate cancer when I'm 90, I'm opting for “watchful waiting” rather than surgery).

Sometimes the most aggressive therapy is the best approach, and sometimes it does make sense to travel to see the world's expert. But, please, don't make assumptions about what your mother wants. Ask her.

Situations become more complicated if your mother has an underlying mental

illness such as depression, or if she seems confused. Your mother might say that she doesn't want treatment for her cancer, but you suspect that she would want treatment if she weren't depressed. For these situations, it's helpful to seek the advice and assistance of your mother's primary care physician.

What's most important for a daughter or son in dealing with a mother's cancer is simply to be present for her. Be available when she wants to talk, and reassure her that you support her in the choices she makes.

This can be difficult because so many of us are accustomed to trying to fix things, and we tend to focus too much on the fix and not enough on the person. Health care providers will naturally focus on your mother's cancer.

As a family member, you have the opportunity and privilege of focusing on her as a person. It's the best gift you'll ever give her.

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Bob Riter  
Cancer Resource Center of the Finger Lakes  
612 W. State Street  
Ithaca, NY 14850  
[bob@ibca.net](mailto:bob@ibca.net)  
607-277-0960