Depression and grief:
Living with ABC may bring feelings of loss and sadness, which everyone copes with differently, it’s important to know that you don’t have to go through this alone. Your family may be experiencing similar feelings and it therefore could be helpful for you and your loved ones to talk openly about these feelings, as well as allowing yourself to take time alone.8

While it is normal to feel sad during this time, if this seems to take over your life you may begin to feel depressed. Talk to your doctor if you experience signs of depression for more than two weeks as there are medications they can prescribe for this condition, as well as psychosocial support provided by psycho-oncologists which may both help you to cope better with the emotional burden.9

Guilt:
As you begin to rely on those around you more, you may take comfort in the support your family provide for you rather than seeing this as a burden to them. They are worried with you and they want to help you. They don’t see you as a burden to them. Frequently others looking after a family member with advanced cancer considered this time as an opportunity to become closer to one another, and refered to the care they provided as an honour. Again you may find it helpful to focus on things that are in your control and let go of any guilt you may feel by accepting that you are not to blame for having ABC.8,9

Support
Below is a list of support resources available to you and your family to help cope with ABC. If you feel that you or your family need more support you can speak with your doctor or nurse about some of the resources below and who may be able to help you.11

• Information and materials
  • Here & Now website
  • Here & Now ABC factsheet
  • Your ABC consultation question booklet
  • ‘For the women we love’, Men against breast cancer

• Support groups
  • [insert local support groups for patients and family]

• Healthcare professionals and other individuals you may wish to speak to beyond your usual healthcare team
  • Psycho-oncologist or therapist
  • Counsellor or social worker
  • Financial advisor
  • Hospital chaplain or faith leader

References
Having advanced breast cancer (ABC) can be very different from what was experienced at earlier stages of the cancer, and may require a different approach from you and the whole family in order to cope with the physical, emotional and financial strains that may be brought on by the condition. This booklet offers advice on methods of coping with ABC and helping your family during this time, as well as the support that is available for you.

How to cope with ABC and supporting your loved one(s)

What to expect and prepare for

Due to the nature of ABC, you may find it difficult to continue daily life at the same pace as before. This could mean cutting down on working hours or other day to day activities, such as housework or looking after your children or grandchildren. These lifestyle changes may present new challenges to you and your family, in terms of finding the practical and financial support to overcome them. It is important to be realistic about what you can and can’t do and to tackle these changes together as a family.

Other women with ABC have found they are not able to retain the same level of involvement in social activities, which in turn may affect those around you, as well as yourself. Understanding the potential changes in the way you share time with your loved ones may help you and your family maintain healthy and supportive relationships throughout this time.

After being diagnosed with ABC you will be faced with difficult choices around treatment goals and your care path. You will go through several stages of your disease, during which you may wish to seek the additional support you are entitled to. This could be support with symptom control, managing pain or psychosocial support – it is important to involve your family in each decision and help them to understand the positives and negatives of all options.

How to understand ABC – asking questions

Understanding your cancer may help you grasp a realistic picture of the journey you will face with ABC and provide a greater sense of control. Healthcare professionals (HCPs) in charge of your care, such as your oncology specialist, GP or nurse (adapt as appropriate), are there to support you through your journey and help you understand the condition, as well as the treatment and care options you have. It is important that you talk with them openly and ask questions, so they can inform you about your cancer at a pace that suits you.

There are also various resources to help you understand ABC, including the different types, the symptoms your loved one may experience and so on. Take a look at the support section on page 4 for a list of resources that may help you.

How to help your loved ones

Similar to yourself, your loved ones may need time to adjust to your ABC diagnosis and come to terms with their feelings. Each individual will take the news differently and you may find yourself comforting others as much as they comfort you. Assuring your family that you are the same as before and they can continue to just be themselves around you, can offer comfort to all of you. Talking about your cancer with your family may not be easy, however you may find it useful to push past the difficulties to talk to your loved ones about your feelings and concerns, your wishes and theirs, and prepare for the future.

Accepting help from your loved ones may also be a way of giving them roles and including them in your life. By accepting their love through practical support, may in turn help them feel appreciated.

Your partner/adult children:

ABC can bring stress to your relationships with all of those around you, but it is likely that you are all experiencing the same thoughts and fears. Although it may be hard, you should try to talk openly with your partner/adult-aged sons and daughters about the various aspects of having ABC, which may include the seriousness of the cancer, fears of death, and how you may wish to prepare for the future. Sharing decision making and welcoming questions may ease the stress of communicating about your cancer and help your loved ones feel relaxed to continue their lives with you as they did before your ABC diagnosis.

Your loved ones could feel guilty as they struggle to balance their personal lives with the time they share with you, particularly as you may begin to rely on them more. Assure them that it is ok to take time to themselves and address their own needs.

Your young children/teenagers:

You can’t protect your children from the realities of ABC, so communication is essential to prepare them for the changes they may experience. It is important to be honest with your children and tell them you are sick in a way that they can understand. Asking them if they have any questions and encouraging them to talk may help them feel more comfortable with the changes they may notice. Reassuring your children, particularly teenagers, that it is important that they continue to go to school and take part in their usual activities will help them to feel normal and it is the best way to help you too.

All children/teenagers will react differently – some may begin to rebel at school or at home, while others may withdraw. Let them know it is ok to be angry or scared. With young children you may wish to let their teacher know what is going on so they can help control the situation. Teenagers, however, may just need some space – you might find it helpful to ask other family members to speak with them also.

Stress and anxiety:

Living with ABC can be a very stressful experience, which can ultimately reduce your feelings of wellbeing. It is therefore important to take certain measures to help deal with the stress of ABC, as well as avoiding other sources of stress as best possible.

To avoid stress you must be realistic about what you can and can’t do – committing to too many activities etc. can lead to conflicts in your schedule, or you may find you don’t have the energy to complete these due to fatigue, which in turn could lead to stress or anxiety. Instead you may find it useful to try to prioritize tasks and activities, and ask for help from those around you when it is needed.

If you are experiencing financial problems, you may wish to address these with your partner and can also get advice from an oncology social worker or financial adviser (adapt as appropriate). It is best to handle these issues quickly so as not to be overwhelmed by them.

Overall, focussing on the things in your life that you can control and realising when things are out of your control will help to ease stress. Other simple things, such as getting frequent moderate exercise, eating well and getting the right amount of sleep can reduce your daily stress levels. You may also find relaxation techniques helpful, such as meditating, listening to soothing music or expressing yourself through art.

Speak openly with your healthcare team about your feelings so you are able to get the right help if you are suffering from anxiety. There may be treatments they can provide or refer you to a specialist namely a psycho-oncologist to help you deal with this.

Anger:

It’s normal to feel angry at having ABC and it may even help you to take action, deciding maybe to learn more about your condition and getting more involved in your care. Anger can, however, also be destructive if you try to hold it in, or it may affect your loved ones around you. You may find it helpful to talk about why you are angry – is it coming from other emotions, such as fear or helplessness? Realising this may help you let go of your anger. It may also help to relieve your energy from the anger in other ways, such as physical activity or art.