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 loved one’s 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 think 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 the energy from the anger in other ways, such as physical activity or art.12,13

Depression and grief:
Watching your family member struggle with ABC can create many 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. 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 a psychologist or the psycho-oncologist who is assisting your loved one, which you may benefit from.12,13

Guilt:
You may feel guilty that you’re not spending enough time with your loved one or providing them with enough care due to your personal life, work, etc getting in the way. It’s important not to feel selfish, to take time for yourself and know that you aren’t expected to be cheerful all the time.12,13

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.16

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

Coping with advanced breast cancer in the family

References
How to cope with ABC in the family and supporting your loved ones

What to expect and prepare for

Due to the nature of ABC, your family member may not be as able to continue daily life at the same pace as before. This could mean she has to cut down on working hours or other day to day activities, such as housework or looking after her children or grandchildren. These lifestyle changes may present new challenges to you and your family, including the practical and financial support to overcome them. You may find it useful to tackle these issues together as a family, and be realistic about what each of you are capable of doing and what support you need to get.2

When your family member is diagnosed with ABC, it is important to reassess the current clinical situation, your family member’s prognosis and the available treatments, including those for managing symptoms such as pain. Some women with ABC may want to know everything about their cancer, whilst others may prefer that you take control of this information instead. You and your loved one can work with the healthcare professionals (HCPs) in charge of their care, such as your oncology specialist, GP or nurse [adapt as appropriate], to support your loved one through ABC and help you both understand the condition, as well as the treatment and care options that are available. It is important to ask questions, so they can inform you both about the cancer at a pace that suits you.2

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.

Women with ABC may find they are not able to retain the same level of control, managing pain or psychosocial support – it is important to support your loved one with each decision and understand the positives and negatives of all options.4

Similar to yourself, your family member may need time to adjust to their ABC diagnosis and come to terms with their feelings. You may not only have to support your loved one in ABC, but also offer support to other family members who are affected by the diagnosis as well. Taking about the cancer with your family may not be easy, however you will need to push through potentially difficult conversations. It is also important to realise your strengths and limits and be able to seek help from others when it is required. This may not only help you, but your loved ones as well, as it will help you stay healthy and provide the time and skills, which may complement yours.5

Your loved one with ABC:

ABC can bring stress to your relationship, but it is likely that you are both experiencing the same emotions, fears, and concerns. Although it may be hard, you may find it useful to talk openly with your loved one about various aspects of ABC, which may include the seriousness of the cancer, fears of your loved one dying, and how to prepare for the future. Offering your support in decision making and asking questions may ease the stress of communicating about cancer.6

It’s also important to show your family member you are happy to just listen to them, as well as allowing them to take their own time if they don’t wish to speak about certain issues. If there are difficult topics you feel you need to speak to your loved one about, such as having a different treatment or getting more support, you should find a quiet time when she is happy to talk to you. Preparing what you want to say in advance and being clear about what your aims are may help handle these difficult situations.7

Facing ABC is quite challenging not only physically but emotionally, it’s normal if your loved one cries or expresses emotion. While sometimes there are things you may like discuss, there are other moments in which expressing an emotion such as ‘I love you and I am here for you’, or physical contact can make a big difference.

Your loved one could feel guilty as she begins to rely on you more and may worry that she is a burden to you. It is essential that you remain realistic about what you can and can’t do for her when you need to seek help – this will help you and may also lessen the guilt of your loved one regarding all the support you are providing.2

Your young children/teenagers:

When a family member has ABC, it is important to reassure children that they will be safe and cared for despite any changes going on around them. 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 vital to be honest with your children and tell them their mother/grandmother is 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 they should continue to go to school and take part in their usual activities will help them to feel normal and it is an important way to help. It is fine for teenagers to help out, but it is important that they know they are not in charge of their loved one’s care and should still spend time to live their life as their peers do. Older children/teenagers may try to protect other family members by hiding their emotions, so it is important to talk openly together as a whole family.5,9,10

For infants or very young children, they won’t understand ABC in the same way you do, but can still be told that their family member is very sick. Maintaining their routine as close to normal may help children feel safe. Your loved one with ABC may not have as much energy to spend the same amount of time playing with the children and you may wish to try to help them understand this doesn’t mean they are angry with them. Cuddling from all family members may help them feel loved and cared for. As children get older and begin to understand more, you should keep them up to date about your family member’s cancer and explain the things they notice. Teenagers have a better understanding of how your loved one’s illness may impact their lives.10,11

All children/teenagers will react differently – some may begin to rebel at school or at home, while others may withdraw. It is important to 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.5

How to take care of yourself during the journey

Aside from looking after your family and ensuring they are coping well, it is just as important to look after yourself. You may have a range of intense emotions that you will need to deal with. Learning how to manage your emotions can improve your wellbeing, help you to feel in control and give you strength to support your family.12,13

Below is a list of emotions you may experience with ABC, and some advice on how you can cope with these. If you find it hard to deal with some of these emotions, it will be important to seek support from a specialist, namely a psycho-oncologist.

Stress and anxiety:

When your loved one has ABC it 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 in the family, 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. You may wish to try to prioritise tasks and activities, and ask for help from those around you when it is needed.14

If you are experiencing financial problems due to your family member’s condition, it is important to address these with your loved one and remember that you 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.14

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.14,15

If you feel you are suffering from anxiety and may need help, speak with a doctor who may be able to help ease your symptoms or refer you to a specialist namely a psychologist or the psycho-oncologist who is assisting your loved one, to help you deal with this.13