



# LOVE ON LIFE'S TERMS

## FINDING THE LANGUAGE TO SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER DURING THE CANCER JOURNEY

By Jennifer Hoang, PharmD

**C**ancer can lead to many distressing symptoms — such as anxiety, depression and pain — that make the treatment journey extremely challenging.<sup>1-5</sup> They not only place an immense amount of strain on the patient, but also on their loved ones, as everyone is affected by the cancer journey.<sup>6</sup>

When I was very young, my uncle was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Alongside his wife and children, my father and his siblings played important roles in his care before he passed away.

It was clear to me how deeply they all cared for him, but also how



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dysfunctional their expressions of love and support became during trying times. As months passed, I watched my uncle lose his quality of life as my extended family — his caretakers — gradually lost the quality of their relationships with one another.

Long after his passing, my uncle's cancer journey still stays with me. It left me with an early awareness of the importance of quality of life and relationship satisfaction, especially in difficult times. It made me wonder: How do we preserve those precious things during times of adversity, like illness?

Thankfully, I had the opportunity to explore this question more deeply when I started pharmacy school. I was given the chance to pursue a research topic

of my choosing, and quality of life and relationship satisfaction during the cancer journey were at the top of my list.

The approach I took to explore these topics became an unexpected and meaningful journey of its own. As a pharmacy student, I was fascinated by clinical trials. I was intrigued by the way they measure the effects of a drug on health outcomes such as easing suffering to extending life. I knew I wanted to create a kind of medicine to trial, something that could improve both quality of life and relationships. Being so new to pharmacy, I couldn't imagine what kind of drug I could possibly use. I knew that many drugs have been discovered by accident.

As serendipity goes, it was during this same time that I experienced my first love. I quickly realized how love can

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make everything better, even long nights of studying and test anxiety. That's when the idea struck me: What if love itself were the "drug" I could test in my research? After all, love activates the brain in similar ways to dopamine, increasing happiness and even reducing the perception of pain.<sup>7</sup>

With my "drug" identified, I just needed to figure out how to administer something so intangible to patients and their loved ones in a way that could be meaningfully measured.

This brought me back to the memories of my family and how relatives struggled to express love and care during my uncle's illness. I realized what they lacked wasn't love, but a language to truly express it — a "love language," if you will.

Inspired, I wanted to build something meaningful, practical and widely accessible. I chose the Rev. Gary Chapman's "The Five Love Languages" (1992). I had used the book as a framework as I navigated the novelty of loving expression.<sup>8</sup>

So, with the help of my faculty mentor at the University of Texas College of Pharmacy, we partnered with Texas Oncology to bring the project to life.

In 2022, we launched the Languages of Love emotional support group, a six-week program designed for cancer patients and their partners. We adapted Chapman's framework into a curriculum tailored to the cancer experience.

Each week, Texas Oncology social workers led sessions exploring one of the five love languages, with exercises for couples to practice between meetings. Sessions also included breakout groups where patients and partners could safely articulate their concerns and reflect on their experiences.

Before and after the six weeks, participants completed surveys measuring data on changes in anxiety, depression, pain and relationship satisfaction that we at the UT College of Pharmacy team

## WHAT ARE THE FIVE LOVE LANGUAGES?

The five love languages, a concept from Baptist minister, author and marriage counselor Gary Chapman, PhD, are five distinct ways people give and receive love. The idea is that everyone has a primary love language, and feeling loved depends on a partner expressing love in their specific language, rather than one's own.

Here's a breakdown of each love language:

**1. Words of Affirmation:** Expressing affection through spoken or written words, such as compliments, encouragement, and words of appreciation.

**2. Acts of Service:** Doing helpful tasks for

your partner, like chores or errands, to show you care.

**3. Receiving Gifts:** Feeling loved through thoughtful and meaningful gifts, whether big or small, that serve as physical symbols of affection.

**4. Quality Time:** Giving a partner your undivided attention and engaging in focused, present interaction, such as having a deep conversation or doing an activity together.

**5. Physical Touch:** Expressing love through physical affection, including hugs, kisses, holding hands or other forms of touch.

would collect and analyze.

The results spoke to the success of the program.

Pre- and post-program surveys showed reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression — statistically significant in feelings of fear ( $p=0.0959$ ), sadness ( $p=0.0816$ ), nervousness ( $p=0.0455$ ) and bad ( $p=0.0531$ ). Relationship satisfaction improved statistically significantly for both patients ( $p=0.0042$ ) and their partners ( $p=0.0959$ ).

Notably, these improvements occurred even though most patients reported statistically significant increased physical pain ( $p=0.0062$ ), as an expected result of progressing illness. These results highlighted something very important to me: even in the worst of times, giving and receiving love can make a meaningful difference.

But the most profound impacts weren't found in the numbers, they were in the written response from the participants. In open-ended responses, participants expressed how the program provided clarity on the importance of their relationship.

One patient wrote: "It was very timely. Actually, it will always be timely. It's a good reminder and poke in the arm as to

why we got married to begin with."

A partner shared: "I think it helped [my partner] and I open up to each other more."

Partners expressed their fear of losing a loved one to cancer, but lacked the emotional space and vocabulary to express that deep concern. Through the program, they found connections with other people supporting a cancer patient whom they could relate to. With the shared strength and commonality, many opened up about their unspoken fears.

Wrote another participant: "It opened our eyes about each other. We have changed over the years, and this helped us understand each other better."

This observation shows how having the language to meet another — where they are, in any circumstance — can make all the difference.

This experience taught me that authentic, vulnerable, intentional communication can greatly enhance emotional support. And during a cancer journey, turning toward one another with love and openness is essential. With accessible tools like the Five Love Languages, couples can

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face trials with renewed connection and care.

This research and support program holds a very special place in my heart. It speaks to my own family's story and has transformed how I show love and support to others.

This work continues to inspire me to seek out quality of life and relationship satisfaction by being mindful of how I communicate my love.

My hope is to continue sharing this language of love with others searching for it and to keep developing it so that it resonates across all forms of relationships, whether romantic, familial, or platonic.

Just as language is universal, I hope that the language of love can become a tool we adopt to find greater meaning, connection, and well-being, even in life's

hardest seasons.

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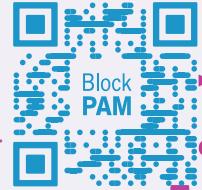
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