SEEKING SUPPORT IN A TIME OF TROUBLE

When a woman is diagnosed with a serious illness, her first thoughts often go to everyone but herself. It’s not just folklore. New research confirms it. But that’s not always a good thing. Women often need to focus more on getting emotional support than giving it during times of illness.

Researchers led by Grace J. Yoo, a medical sociologist at San Francisco State University's Biobehavioral Research Center, interviewed 164 San Francisco-area breast cancer survivors with an average age of 57. They wanted to learn how the survivors told others of their diagnosis.

Not surprisingly, the survey found most women repressed or controlled their own emotions to protect their spouse, parents, children and friends. “At a time when they are forced to deal with their own vulnerabilities, women with breast cancer must also navigate the vulnerabilities of loved ones as they react to the news,” said Yoo.

That’s not necessarily the way to go, she said. Indeed, Yoo found when women opened up to others, most were surprised by the extent of the support they received and by the depth and breadth of their own social networks.

Clearly, the best way to deal with a health problem may be to talk about it. Yoo advises women to start by seeking out others with the same illness who can offer understanding and resources. “Involving and including others in an illness increases intimacy among friends and family and opens the door to additional support.”

Sources: American Sociological Association; National Library of Medicine