DEADLY DNA
As humans, we like to be able to count on certain things. It’s nice, for example, to know what the weather is bringing our way or what the workday is going to look like. This feeling of moderate control makes us feel more secure and better able to manage our lives.

On a deeper level, knowing what is coming can actually save your life.

Thanks to genetic screening, it is now possible to predict with a reasonable level of accuracy whether or not someone — and sometimes his or her family members — will contract certain diseases. But that’s not the end of the story; patients need counseling and support so they may use this information to make good decisions, now and later.

Meet Andrea Farkas Patenaude, PhD, who focuses on finding these answers and supporting patients in processing them.

DIFFICULT DECISIONS
At the Dana-Farber/Harvard Cancer Center, Patenaude studies issues related to genetic screening. These include studying women’s awareness of risks associated with gene mutations that predispose them to developing breast and ovarian cancers, as well as how best to support people with decisions to undergo a genetic test, understand the test and, for some, act on its findings.

“It’s impressive how much of people’s beliefs about cancer reflect their personal life history rather than medical facts,” Patenaude observes. “Hereditary cancers provoke fear and a sense that there’s no end to the pain, so it opens up old wounds and brings up many psychological problems.”

Patenaude helps patients deal with some of the emotions that surround issues of genetics and health. In this role, she counsels patients who are either considering genetic screening or have already undergone testing. The information patients learn often leads to tough decisions, such as whether or not they should tell their young children or if they should undergo preventive — and life-changing — surgery.

As daunting as assisting people in this situation can be, Patenaude maintains that “helping people find some relief for the stress of having a lot of cancer in their family is the best part of my job.”

TESTING IS ONLY THE FIRST STEP
As the understanding of genetics and epigenetics (hereditary changes in the way our genes work) grows, so does the need for trained professionals like Patenaude. That’s why she presses forward in her dual role. She hopes her research will inform current and future counselors who may not have experience in cancer genetics so they can better understand the complex and personal issues that arise through genetic testing.

“I’d love it if there were more ways to spread the education about genetics to more psychologists and other mental health professionals,” she says, “so there would be a larger cadre of trained mental health professionals in the community.”

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