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When Someone You Know Has Cancer

How you can help



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Finding out that someone you know has cancer, whether it's a friend or relative, a neighbour or co-worker, often comes as a shock. Perhaps you've never been through something like this before with someone you consider a friend. What should you say? What should you do? How should you act?

You're not alone in wondering and worrying. This brochure will help you understand what someone with cancer is going through and provides some ideas on how you can offer support. Many of the tips are also appropriate if your friend is caring for someone with cancer.

We'd like to thank the people who shared their stories with us – their words are offered here for support.

How people cope with cancer

Just as every person is unique, so is every person's cancer experience. Don't assume your friend will feel or act a certain way. Depending on the type of cancer, the stage, the prognosis and the treatment, your friend may feel well enough to continue with daily activities or may feel too tired, upset or ill to complete everyday tasks. And your friend may feel sick or in pain one day, but better the next.

Cancer can affect emotions too. Your friend may feel:

- worried and scared
- angry and frustrated
- out of control
- sad
- guilty
- isolated
- lonely
- resentful

It's normal for moods to change from day to day or even from hour to hour. It's normal for someone with cancer to be quieter than usual, to need time alone and, at times, to be angry.

Cancer can lead to a lot of change in someone's life, and everyone develops different ways to cope with this. Just as you need to respect your friend's feelings and moods, it's important to respect the different ways people cope.

Your friend may be very private, while others are open and talk about their feelings. Some people find strength by continuing as usual and making the most of every day. (And this doesn't necessarily mean they are in denial about having cancer.) Some are even able to find relief by seeing the funny side of things and having a laugh whenever they can.

Dealing with your own uneasiness

It's normal to feel a little uneasy or even uncomfortable around people with cancer, especially if they look or seem different. They might have had a limb removed or lost their hair. Many people lose or gain weight during treatment. They may be emotional, or they may seem distant. For your friend's sake, try to get through any discomfort you have. Remind yourself that cancer isn't contagious – so no matter how uneasy you feel, you don't have to stay away. Don't avoid a friend at a time when you are needed the most.

It's also normal to feel sorry for your friend or feel guilty for being healthy yourself. You may find that talking about your feelings and fears with your friend is easier than you think – and it should help you manage them. Then you can focus on being helpful and supportive.

Talking to someone with cancer

There are no phrases or approaches that are right for all situations. Many people are afraid of saying the wrong thing to someone with cancer, but if you use your own words to show interest and concern, express encouragement or offer support, you'll do just fine.

You might say:

- I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know that I care about you.
- I'm sorry that you're going through this.
- If you ever feel like talking, I'm here to listen.
- **What are you feeling?**
(This may help a friend open up more than if you just ask, "How are you feeling?")
- I'm thinking of you. / You're in my prayers.

Don't say:

- I know how you feel.
(If you haven't had the same experience with cancer, then you don't.)
- I don't know how you manage.
- Don't worry.
- I'm sure you'll be fine.
- Tell me what I can do to help.
(Instead, be specific about what you can do.)
- How much time do the doctors give you?
- I know someone who had the same thing and it was really horrible.
- I feel so bad/helpless about this. It's making me cry all the time. (This isn't about you.)

📌 Need more info? Visit cancer.ca and search for: *How to be a good listener.*

When someone you work with has cancer

Relationships between co-workers vary a lot. You may not know the person very well, or you may have worked together for many years and become close friends. Regardless of your relationship, it's okay to talk about cancer, but remember to respect your co-worker's privacy. If your co-worker tells you about having cancer, don't tell anyone else unless you've been asked to do so. After that, help in whatever way feels right based on the type of friendship you have.

📌 Need more info? Visit cancer.ca and search for: *When someone you work with has cancer.*

Visiting someone who has cancer

Visiting can boost your friend's spirits and can also give caregivers a much-needed break. Always call before you visit to make sure visitors are welcome that day. If they're not, don't be afraid to call back and offer to visit another day. And even when plans are made, be flexible – depending on how your friend feels, you may have to reschedule.

Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind when visiting:

- Turn off your cell phone and give your friend your undivided attention.
- Don't make plans to visit when you know you don't have a lot of time. It takes time to really listen and give someone your full attention.
- Let the person with cancer be the leader. If they want to talk, listen. Don't offer advice unless you're asked for it.

- Don't be afraid to talk about cancer.
- Touch your friend. A simple squeeze of the hand, a touch on the arm or a hug can say much more than words.
- Try to keep your eyes on the person you're talking to. If you keep looking around, your friend may think you're nervous.
- You don't always have to talk about cancer – unless your friend wants to. If you used to chat about current events, family news, office gossip, sports scores and so on, then you still can when you visit.
- Be funny and laugh when needed. It's okay to continue to laugh and enjoy life.
- Don't feel that you always have to talk. It's okay to sit silently together. Your company is what matters.
- If neither of you wants to talk, you can still be supportive by doing something together. For example, go for a walk, rent a movie, watch TV, listen to music or do a shared hobby, such as scrapbooking, knitting or painting, together. (But be mindful that cancer or its treatment may limit what your friend can do, at least for a while.)
- Don't be offended if your friend is feeling too tired, cranky or ill for a visit. Be sensitive to your friend's needs and moods.
- If you and your friend used to have a routine or tradition, suggest that you continue with it –

but with some changes if needed. For example, if you used to go for morning jogs together, suggest going for walks. And if you used to go to the movies together, suggest watching DVDs at home or maybe going to matinees when your friend isn't tired.

- Don't stay too long. You don't want to tire your friend out.

“ *When a certain friend would come visit, if I didn't want to talk that day, he would just sit and keep me company. He wouldn't try to talk or give me any advice – he would just be with me and be okay with the silence.* ~ Kim

Helping in practical ways

Practical help with the everyday parts of life can really help someone with cancer and their caregivers. While you're doing the day-to-day work, they can focus on treatment and getting much-needed rest. Instead of saying “Just call if you need anything”, be creative. Find something you can do and suggest that you do it for them. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

- Shop for groceries or offer to drop off or pick up prescriptions.
- Offer to do household chores, such as getting the mail, walking the dog, doing laundry, cleaning, cutting the grass, watering plants, shovelling snow or taking out the garbage.

- Prepare ready-made meals that can easily be frozen and re-heated by the family. (Check first to see if cancer treatment has affected what your friend can eat, as well as what the family's likes and dislikes are.)
- Look after children, take them to and from school and evening activities, or arrange playdates.
- Offer to be a “point person” to organize schedules for meals, chores or visitors. Sometimes just organizing many offers of help can seem overwhelming.
- Drive your friend to and from medical appointments.

“ *When my sister was very ill, one of her friends drew up a visitor schedule. She checked with my sister by e-mail every day to see if she was up for company or not. This thoughtfulness was very touching and surprisingly helpful – my sister had the emotional support of visiting friends but didn't have the task of organizing the visits or cancelling them when she just didn't feel up to it.* ~ Christine

Caregivers need help and support too

If your friend is caring for someone with cancer, their long days may be spent driving to appointments, talking to healthcare providers, giving medication and making sure their loved one is well looked after. And then they are often running their own home, making meals, cleaning, caring for their children and going to work every day. They find the strength to do it all, but often they forget to look after themselves. If you know someone who is caring for someone with cancer, offer to help. Think about their daily routine and suggest ways you can give them a break.

“ *When I was caring for my parents, sometimes people would just show up at the front door with food and say nothing more than, ‘I hope you have a good day.’ It was so helpful.* ~ Kim

Giving gifts

Some people like to give a gift, especially if they can't visit – but don't feel that you have to. Many people simply send cards to let someone know they care. If you do want to give a gift, think about what will help your friend most, either by lifting their spirits or by helping them out with something practical. Obviously, a good place to start is your friend's interests, hobbies, talents and likes, but don't forget to consider whether the demands of cancer have affected their time, energy, concentration and ability to get around.

Here are a few ideas:

- magazines or books
- music
- DVDs
- puzzle books
- note cards or a journal
- gift certificates for a housecleaning service
- gift certificates for spa services
- pyjamas or robe
- flowers or plants (as long as someone can take care of them)

Caregivers may also appreciate gifts and cards with words of support.

Offering help and support over time

When first diagnosed, many people are offered a lot of care and support. This help often goes away over time, even though it's needed just as much as it was in the early days. Cancer treatment and recovery can take many months, so do your best to continue supporting your friend.

Sometimes after treatment is finished, cancer comes back. If it does, your friend may react and cope differently than the first time. And the help and support they need may be different this time too. Communication is important. Talk about how you can help before doing the same things you did the last time they had cancer. Continue to be a sensitive listener and offer your friendship, support and love.

Where to get more information

If you want more information about cancer, support programs and community services, start by contacting the Canadian Cancer Society:

- Call us toll-free Monday to Friday at 1-888-939-3333 (TTY 1-866-786-3934). If you need help in another language, interpreters are available.
- Email info@cis.cancer.ca.
- Visit cancer.ca.
- Contact your local Canadian Cancer Society office.

Our services are free and confidential.

What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer and our services or to make a donation.



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