

## **Supporting a Friend Who Has Cancer [1]**

If you have a friend who has recently been diagnosed with cancer, or is living with cancer, you may be wondering the best way to support him or her. Even though you want to help your friend through this difficult time, it can be hard to know what to say or do. While there are no set rules when it comes to supporting a friend who has cancer, this article will help you find ways to show your support, including ideas of what to say and how to provide practical help, as well as suggestions for thoughtful gifts.

### **Preparing yourself**

A good first step is to learn more about the diagnosis beforehand. Your friend may not want to talk about the details for many reasons, including that it is physically and emotionally tiring to repeat the same information to different people. If possible, the person's spouse or a mutual friend may be able to give you the basics. Write it down and repeat it back to them to be sure you've gotten the correct information. And if there's information that is unknown or not shared, don't push for more.

Before a visit, you may want to remember a time when you were really scared or felt really sick. Think about what it felt like. What did you want to talk about? How did you want to be treated? You may also want to prepare yourself for changes in your friend's appearance. [Fatigue](#) [2], [weight changes](#) [3], and [hair loss](#) [4] are common side effects of cancer and many treatments. Start your visit by saying "It's good to see you" instead of commenting on any physical changes.

### **Helpful tips when supporting a friend**

Although each person with cancer is different, here are some general suggestions for showing support:

- Ask permission before visiting, before giving advice, before asking questions. And make it clear that saying no is perfectly okay.
- Make flexible plans that can be easily changed in case something comes up or your friend needs to cancel or reschedule.
- Don't be afraid to make plans for the future; this gives your friend something positive to look forward to. Be careful not to come across as pushy or demanding though.
- Be humorous and fun when appropriate and when needed.

- Allow for sadness?do not ignore uncomfortable topics or feelings.
- Make time for a weekly check-in phone call. Let your friend know when you will be calling, and let your friend know that it is okay to not answer the phone.
- Offer to help with specific tasks, such as taking care of children, taking care of a pet, or preparing a meal. Many people find it hard to ask for help, and your friend will likely appreciate the offer. However, if your friend declines an offer, don?t take it personally.
- Follow through on a commitment to help.
- Try not to let your friend?s condition get in the way of your friendship. As much as possible, treat him or her the same way you always have.
- Ask about interests, hobbies, and other topics not related to cancer?people going through treatment sometimes need a break from talking about the disease.
- If you aren't sure how to help, ask.

### **What to say**

Here are some simple guidelines to use when talking with your friend.

### ***Avoid saying***

- I know just how you feel.
- You need to talk.
- I know just what you should do.
- I feel helpless.
- I don't know how you manage.
- I?m sure you?ll be fine.
- Don?t worry.
- How much time do the doctors give you?
- How long do you have?
- Let me know what I can do. (Instead, offer specific ways you can help or other things you can provide if they need it.)

### ***Do say***

- I'm sorry this has happened to you.
- If you ever feel like talking, I am here to listen.
- What are you thinking of doing, and how can I help?
- I care about you.
- I?m thinking about you.
- I don?t know what to say. (It is better to be honest than to simply stop calling or visiting out of fear.)

### **Practical help**

Your assistance with daily tasks and chores is valuable help to a friend going through cancer treatment. Be creative with the help you offer. Remember that your friend?s needs may change, so be flexible in shifting your plans as needed. Here are some suggestions:

- Shop for groceries and pick up prescriptions.

- Help with chores around the house, such as getting the mail, taking care of pets, cleaning, doing laundry, taking care of plants and flowers, and taking out the garbage.
- Cook dinner and drop it off at your friend's house.
- Schedule a night of takeout food and movies together.
- Baby-sit children, take them to and from school and evening activities, and arrange for play dates.
- Organize a phone chain and/or support team to check on your friend regularly.
- Call, email, or text regularly. Let your friend know it's okay if he or she doesn't reply.
- Drive your friend to an appointment or a support group meeting [5]. You can take notes during a doctor's appointment or keep your friend company during a treatment session.
- Go for a walk together.
- Think about the little things your friend enjoys and makes life "normal" for them. This could be helping to decorate for a holiday or weeding the garden. If there is something your friend would usually do, there are many ways you can make it a bit easier for him or her to do it.

### **Forming support teams**

Organizing a support team is a great way to help a friend living with cancer. Some online communities [6] offer tools to coordinate tasks among friends and caregivers, and shareable online calendars may help you organize activities among your group of friends and family. Or you can always make a paper calendar and write in the various activities and commitments by hand. Make sure your friend has access to the calendar so he or she knows what to expect and when.

### **Gift ideas**

There may be times when you want to give your friend a gift. As with any gift, keep in mind the interests and hobbies of your friend and your relationship to that friend. For instance, a close friend may be able to give something really silly or unusual, whereas a neighbor or work colleague may want to stick with something more traditional.

While giving a gift is one way to show you care about someone, be careful not to give your friend anything that promotes a specific treatment or philosophy as a cure for cancer. People make decisions about their disease after a lot of thought so it's important to respect their choices and their coping process, whether it is what you would do in the same situation or not. Keep gifts fun, interesting, serious, or light, depending on what your friend needs the most at that moment.

Some ideas include:

- Magazines, audio books, novels, books of short stories or poetry, or gift cards to purchase reading material
- CDs or gift cards for downloadable music
- DVDs of movies, TV shows, or documentaries
- Accessories (earrings, bracelets, scarves, ties, hats), makeup, or beauty items
- Crossword or Sudoku puzzles
- Note cards or a journal
- A video message from family and friends
- Gift certificates for massage, spa services, restaurants, or museum/art gallery passes
- Gift cards to grocery stores

- A housecleaning service
- Portable hobby supply kits (scrapbooking, drawing, needlepoint)
- Pajamas or robe
- Flowers or plants

## **Friendship makes a difference**

Continuing friendships and regular activities after a cancer diagnosis is a great way to further the healing process. But don't forget that friends also need encouragement and support after cancer treatment has finished. After treatment your friend will be trying to find his or her "new normal" in this next phase of life, and friendships are an important part of that. With these practical suggestions in mind, your friendship can make a lasting difference to a person living with cancer.

## **More Information**

[Talking With Someone Who Has Cancer](#) [7]

[Support and Resource Links](#) [8]

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### **Links:**

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-and-emotions/communicating-loved-ones/supporting-friend-who-has-cancer>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25048>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25263>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25251>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25310>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25325>