

[Home](#) > [Coping With Cancer](#) > [Talking With Family and Friends](#) > [Supporting a Friend Who Has Cancer](#)

PDF generated on July 23, 2016 from

<http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/supporting-friend-who-has-cancer>

Supporting a Friend Who Has Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 10/2015

If one of your friends has cancer, you may be wondering the best way to support him or her. Even though you want to help, it can be hard to know what to say or do.

It's important to remember that there are no set rules and every friendship is different. Be sure to think about your unique dynamic and let that guide you as you try to support your friend. Keep it simple. Remember that often the little things mean the most.

Take Time to Prepare Yourself

- **Process your own feelings beforehand.** Learning that a friend has cancer can be difficult news to hear. Take time to acknowledge and cope with your own emotions about the diagnosis before you see him or her. This way, you can keep the focus on your friend.
- **Learn about the diagnosis.** Your friend may not want to talk about the details for many reasons. It can be 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. In addition, if there's information that is unknown or not shared, don't push for more.
- **Think about it from your friend's perspective.** Remember a time when you were scared or felt 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](#) [3], [weight changes](#) [4], and [hair loss](#) [5] 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, giving advice, and asking questions, ask if it is welcome. Be sure to make it clear that saying no is perfectly okay.
- **Make plans.** Don't be afraid to make plans for the future. This gives your friend something to look forward to, especially with the sometimes long and drawn out cancer treatment.
- **Be flexible.** Make flexible plans that are easy to change in case something comes up or your friend needs to cancel or reschedule.
- **Laugh together.** Be humorous and fun when appropriate and when needed. A light conversation or a funny story can make a friend's day.
- **Allow for sadness.** Do not ignore uncomfortable topics or feelings.
- **Check in.** Make time for a check-in phone call. Let your friend know when you will be calling. Also, let your friend know that it is okay not to answer the phone.
- **Offer to help.** Many people find it hard to ask for help. However, your friend will likely appreciate the offer. You can offer to help with specific tasks, such as taking care of children, taking care of a pet, or preparing a meal. However, if your friend declines an offer, don't take it personally.
- **Follow through.** If you commit to help, it is important that you follow through on your promise.
- **Treat them the same.** 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.

- **Talk about topics other than cancer.** Ask about interests, hobbies, and other topics not related to cancer. People going through treatment sometimes need a break from talking about the disease.
- **Read his or her blog, web page, or group emails.** Oftentimes, people living with cancer blog about their experience to share with friends and family. Or, a family member will post updates to a personal web page or send a group email. Stay current with these updates so that your friend doesn't have to repeat experiences or information multiple times. These updates are also a great way to start a conversation.

What to say

Don't be afraid to talk with your friend. It is better to say, "I don't know what to say" than to stop calling or visiting out of fear.

Here are some options to help show your care and support:

- I'm sorry this has happened to you.
- If you ever feel like talking, I'm here to listen.
- What are you thinking of doing, and how can I help?
- I care about you.
- I'm thinking about you.

Here are examples of phrases that are unhelpful:

- I know just how you feel.
- I know just what you should do.
- I'm sure you'll be fine.

- Don't worry.
- How long do you have?

Remember, you can communicate with someone in many different ways, depending on how he or she prefers to communicate. If you don't see your friend regularly, a simple phone call, text message, or video call shows that you care. Let your friend know it's okay if he or she doesn't reply.

Practical help

Your help with daily tasks and chores is often valuable for a friend with cancer. Be creative with the help you offer. Remember that your friend's needs may change, so be flexible in shifting your plans as needed. Let them know that you are available if an unexpected need comes up.

If receiving practical help is difficult for your friend, you can gently remind them that you do not expect them to return the favor and you do it because you care. While not being pushy, try to suggest specific tasks. Asking "how can I help?" can be broad and overwhelming for your friend. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- Shop for groceries and pick up prescriptions.
- Help with chores around the house.
- Cook dinner and drop it off at your friend's house. Ask about dietary restrictions beforehand.
- Schedule a night of takeout food and movies together.
- Baby-sit children, take them to and from school and activities, or arrange for play dates.
- Organize a phone chain and/or support team to check on your friend regularly.
- Drive your friend to an appointment or a [support group meeting](#) [6]. Offer to take notes during an appointment or provide company during a treatment.
- Go for a walk together.

- Think about the little things your friend enjoys and makes life “normal” for them. Offer to help make these activities easier.
- Offer to make any difficult phone calls. Or, gather information [about different resources they may need](#) [7].
- Find small ways to support your friend if he or she decides to participate in a fundraiser or outing.

Forming support teams

Organizing a support team is a great way to help a friend living with cancer. Some [online communities](#) [8] offer tools to coordinate tasks among friends and caregivers. Shareable online calendars 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. A close friend may be able to give something really silly or unusual. A neighbor or work colleague may want to stick with something more traditional. 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
- Pictures of friends and family
- 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
- Balloons
- 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. 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. 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

[Video: Talking with Someone Who Has Cancer](#) [9]

[Talking with Someone Who Has Cancer](#) [10]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/supporting-friend-who-has-cancer>

- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25048>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25263>
- [5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25251>
- [6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25383>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/30666>
- [8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24634>
- [9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/29366>
- [10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25310>