Talking With Someone Who Has Cancer

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A cancer diagnosis often brings sadness, anger, confusion, and feelings of helplessness. These feelings make it important for the person with cancer to know that support and help are readily available. Many times, those closest to the person with cancer provide the most support. However, sometimes it may be difficult to know what to say and what not to say, how to be sensitive, and how to remain supportive at all times.

Ways to convey your support

Keep the lines of communication open. Sometimes it's best to listen instead of leading the conversation. Let your friend or family member decide when it's an appropriate time to talk, and let that person decide where to take the conversation. Be patient. If you feel the need to ask questions, phrase your questions carefully. Keep in mind that people with cancer are often asked many questions by their friends and family members. Remember to keep talking about all the usual and familiar topics; not every conversation needs to be about cancer.

Be respectful. Sometimes you may need to use your instincts to assess the needs of your friend or family member. Respect his or her need to be alone at times. He or she may need to vent frustrations or anger, which is normal. Try not to take it personally.

Help the person stay involved. Finding the right balance between being supportive and available while keeping things the same as before a cancer diagnosis is challenging. Some people with cancer cope best by staying involved and continuing old routines as much as possible. This approach may at times be impossible because of time constraints or a lack of energy and stamina due to the cancer or its treatment. Remaining flexible and supportive is often the best way to help.

Be honest about your feelings but don't overburden. When a person you care about is diagnosed with cancer, feelings of fear, anxiety, anger, or disbelief are normal. Be sure to communicate what you're feeling, but try to be brief in your explanations so as not to overburden and cause additional distress. If maintaining your composure is difficult, give yourself some time away to calm your feelings before addressing the situation again.

Provide active support. Your friend or family member with cancer will need both your emotional and physical support throughout their treatment. Suggest specific ways to help, such as running an errand, caring for the pets, driving your friend or family member to an appointment, or picking up the children from school. If a person receives many offers of help, you may want to help coordinate everyone's efforts. Some online communities [2] offer tools to help organize these requests. Ask your friend or family member with cancer for specific suggestions or ways you can help. It's much better to offer specific examples of ways you can help rather than saying, ?let me know if you need any help.? Be aware of this person's needs and know that some people have a hard time asking for help.

Show support with your body language. Keep eye contact, listen attentively, and avoid distractions when involved in a conversation. Allow for periods of silence. Don't be rushed and need to leave abruptly. Smile and touch appropriately. Take cues from the situation and your surroundings to determine how best to react and provide support.

Be a "constant" in a changing world. A diagnosis of cancer causes many changes. Try to be a source of stability and support for the person with cancer. Help the person you care about adjust to new routines and to relationships that may have changed. Assure your friend or family member with cancer that you are there.

Other tips

Listen before giving advice. Giving unsolicited advice may cause unnecessary pressure. Listen carefully before offering to fix things.

Choose your words carefully. Because it's impossible to truly know what it's like to be diagnosed with cancer unless you have been diagnosed yourself, avoid phrases, such as ?I know what you're going through ...? and ?I know how you must feel ...?

Once confirmed, don't deny the reality of the cancer diagnosis. A cancer diagnosis often invokes fear and insecurity and should be taken very seriously. Avoid making statements, such as "Everything will be fine â€¦" or "It's okay â€¦? Statements like this may not only prove to be false if the treatment is not effective, but they may also make the person with cancer withdraw from accepting your support because the person cannot express his or her true concerns.

Don't rush to control the situation. When you hear of a cancer diagnosis in your family, among your friends, or at your workplace, your first instinct may be to take charge of the situation. Instead, be open to the suggestions of others and the advice of the health care team. It may be helpful if you provide assistance in important decision-making matters, but do not assign yourself as the one to actually make the decisions.

Don't minimize your own feelings. When someone close to you is diagnosed with cancer, you may naturally keep the pain to yourself. You may also feel guilty about being healthy. If you find that coping and caregiving are becoming overwhelming, talk to someone you trust, such as a counselor or clergy member. If your feelings go unresolved, you may not be emotionally able to provide support.

Avoid excessive worry. Everyone makes mistakes at times. Sometimes you may say the wrong thing, or you may say something seemingly innocent at the wrong time. In any event, be yourself. Don't become overly involved with worry about whether you are handling the situation the right way. Let your support and desire to help be heartfelt and genuine.

More Information

Supporting a Friend Who Has Cancer [3]

Talking About Cancer [4]

Caregiving [5]

Support and Resource Links [6]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/about-us
[2] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Quality+of+Life/Online+Communities+for+Support
[3] http://www.cancer.net/patient/All+About+Cancer/Cancer.Net+Feature+Articles/Family%2C+Friends%2C+and+Caregivers/Supporting+a+Friend+Who+Has+Cancer
[4] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Relationships+and+Cancer/Talking+About+Cancer
[5] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Coping/Caregiving
[6] http://www.cancer.net/patient/Publications+and+Resources/Support+and+Resource+Links