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Talking With Someone Who Has Cancer [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board \[2\]](#), 01/2015

Key Messages:

- Talking with a family member or friend can help someone diagnosed with cancer cope with the range of emotions he or she is feeling.
- If a relative or friend was diagnosed with cancer, you can ask if he or she wishes to share some information or just chat about how things are going.
- Be prepared for a range of responses. Some may welcome your invitation to talk, and others may prefer to say as little as possible. This may change over time, so be patient and find a way to express your support.
- If your friend or relative chooses to share, listen attentively and be mindful about asking too many questions or overburdening him or her with your own feelings.
- Let your friend or relative set the tone. Some people may seem very cheerful because they simply cannot deal with the sadness. If your friend or family member seems sad, find a way to provide support and encouragement.

Feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, and helplessness come with a cancer diagnosis. For the person who has been diagnosed with cancer, it's helpful when friends and family members provide a comforting presence and practical support. However, people often don't know what to say to someone who has cancer. Here are some tips to help you show your support:

Take your cues from the person with cancer. Ask the person if they would like to talk about the experience. It's best to allow him or her to decide when to talk and how much to share.

Show support without words. Your body and facial expressions can also convey your message of caring and support. Keep eye contact, listen attentively, and avoid distractions when talking. One important way to provide support is to share some silence without needing to drown it out with chatter.

Choose your words carefully. Make sure to acknowledge how difficult this experience is for your friend or family member. Carefully choosing what you say can help you show your support without being dismissive or avoiding the topic. For example, 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?

Practice active listening. This is a technique that professionals use to show respect. It is a helpful way for you to show that you are connecting to your friend's or family member's words and feelings. All it takes is to give your full attention, avoid thinking about what comes next, or hurrying the conversation and forcing it to a conclusion.

Use caution when asking questions. Phrase your questions carefully and consider the number of questions that you ask in a conversation. People with cancer are often asked many questions by their friends and family members, and it can become tiresome.

Make sure it's okay to give advice. Before you offer any advice, ask if it's okay and be prepared to stop if you are not encouraged to continue. If you feel prompted to make a suggestion, ask for the person's permission to share it before proceeding. Unsolicited advice may cause unnecessary stress.

Be honest about your feelings but don't overburden. Communicate feelings you may be experiencing—such as fear, anxiety, anger, or disbelief—in response to the person's cancer diagnosis. But try to be brief in your explanations. Spending too much time expressing difficult emotions you are feeling may overwhelm and upset the person with cancer. If you struggle to maintain your composure, give yourself some time away to calm your feelings before talking

again. You may find that meeting with a [counselor](#) [3] helps you process and manage your emotions.

Talk about topics other than cancer. Talking about usual topics may help provide a sense of balance. The intent is not to distract your friend or family member, but to help him or her maintain usual interests and connections and take a break from difficult conversations.

Encourage the person to stay involved. Help your friend or family member decide how to stay involved in his or her typical activities and continue old routines. Those steps help many people with cancer cope during a time that includes many unfamiliar experiences. However, a lack of time or energy from cancer or its treatment may prevent some people from usual activities and routines.

You may be able to help your friend or family member prioritize the activities they want to do and delegate other tasks. For example, you can suggest that your friend or family member saves energy to attend his or her child's soccer game or school play while asking for volunteers to help with household chores.

Ask if practical support would be helpful. Offer specific examples of ways you could help during cancer treatment, and ask if those suggestions sound helpful. Ideas include running errands, caring for pets, driving the person to an appointment, or picking up children from school. This approach is better than saying, "Let me know if you need any help," because some people have a hard time asking for help. If many friends and family members volunteer to help, you may offer to coordinate everyone's efforts. Some [online communities](#) [4] provide tools to help manage everyone's involvement.

More Information

[Supporting a Friend Who Has Cancer](#) [5]

[Talking About Cancer](#) [6]

[Communicating with Loved Ones](#) [7]

[Finding Support and Information](#) [8]

Links

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

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24699>

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

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24691>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25302>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25112>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/30666>