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How to Be a Friend to Someone with Cancer

Friendship and cancer

Today, most people with cancer are treated as outpatients, meaning they don't have to stay in the hospital. During this time they often need help, support, and encouragement.

Many studies have found that cancer survivors with strong emotional support tend to better adjust to the changes cancer brings, have a more positive outlook, and often report a better quality of life. Research has shown that people with cancer need support from friends. You can make a big difference in the life of someone with cancer.

Friends of people with cancer often want to help, but don't know what to do.

As you spend time with your friend and learn more about how cancer is affecting their everyday life, keep your eyes open for other things you can offer. See how your friend responds to different activities, and know that the situation may change as treatment goes on. Tailoring your help to what they need and enjoy most is the best way to be a friend. Here we will give you some ideas about where to start.

What you can do: Notes and calls

Make sure your friend knows that they're important to you. Show that you still care for your friend despite changes in what they can do or how they look.

- Send brief, frequent notes or texts, or make short, regular calls
- Ask questions
- End a call or note with "I'll be in touch again soon," and follow through

- Call at times that work best for your friend or set times for them to call you
- Return their messages right away
- Check in with the person who helps with their daily care (caregiver) to see what else they might need

What you can do: Visits

Cancer can be very isolating. Try to spend time with your friend – you may be a welcome distraction and help them feel like they did before cancer became a major focus of their life.

- Always call before you visit. Be understanding if your friend can't see you at that time.
- Schedule a visit that allows you to give physical and emotional support for the caregiver, too. Maybe you can arrange to stay with your friend while the caregiver gets out of the house for a couple of hours.
- Make short, regular visits rather than long, infrequent ones. Understand that your friend might not want to talk, but they may not like being alone either.
- Begin and end the visit with a touch, a hug, or a handshake.
- Be understanding if you are asked .
- Always refer to your next visit so your friend can look forward to it.
- Offer to bring a snack or treat to share so your visit doesn't impose on the caregiver.
- Try to visit at times other than weekends or holidays, when others may visit. Time can seem the same to a house-bound patient. A Tuesday morning can be just as lonely as a Saturday night.
- Take your own needlework, crossword puzzle, or book, and keep your friend company while they doze or watch TV.
- Share music they enjoy, watch their favorite TV show, or watch a movie with your friend.
- Read sections of a book or newspaper, or find topics of interest online and summarize them for your friend.
- Offer to take a short walk with your friend if they are up to it.

Don't be afraid to touch, hug, or shake hands with your friend .

What you can do: Conversation

Many people worry that they don't know what to say to someone with cancer. Try to remember that the most important thing is not what you say – it's that you're there and willing to listen. Try to hear and understand how your friend feels. Let them know that you're open to talking whenever they feel like it. Or, if the person doesn't feel like talking, let them know that's OK, too.

- Listen without always feeling that you have to respond. Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs most.
- Gear the conversation to your friend's attention span so they don't feel overwhelmed or guilty about not being able to talk.
- Help your friend focus on whatever brings out good feelings, such as sports, religion, travel, or pets.
- Help your friend keep an active role in the friendship by asking advice, opinions, and questions – even if you don't get the response you expect.
- Ask your friend if they're having any discomfort. Suggest new ways to be more comfortable, such as using more pillows or moving the furniture.
- Give honest compliments, such as "You look rested today."
- Support your friend's feelings. Allow them to be negative, withdrawn, or silent. Resist the urge to change the subject.
- Don't urge your friend to fight the disease if they feel it's too hard to do it.
- Don't tell them how strong they are; they may feel the need to act strong even when they're sad or exhausted.
- Be sure to include your friend when talking to others in the room.
- Assume that your friend can hear you even if they seem to be asleep or dazed.
- Don't offer medical advice or your opinions on things like diet, vitamins, and herbal therapies.
- Respect their decisions about how their cancer care will be treated, even if you disagree.
- Don't remind them of past behaviors that might be related to the illness, such as drinking or smoking. Some people feel guilty over those things.

Ask your friend questions. Ask for their advice and opinions.

What you can do: Errands and projects

Many people want to help friends facing a difficult time. Keep in mind that wanting to help and offering to be there for your friend is what matters most.

- Take care of any urgent errands your friend or the caregiver needs right away.
- Run an errand for the caregiver; it's as helpful as an errand for your friend.
- Your friend may appreciate it more if you take care of frequent, scheduled errands, rather than fewer ones that take a lot of time.
- Look for ways to help on a regular basis.
- Plan projects in advance and start them only after talking with the caregiver.
- Include the person in usual work projects, plans, and social events. Let them be the one to tell you if the commitment is too much to manage.
- Check before doing something for your co-worker with cancer, no matter how helpful you think you are being. Keep them up-to-date with what's happening at work.

Suggested ideas:

- Get a list of tasks. Organize friends, neighbors, and co-workers to help complete the tasks on a regular, weekly basis. There are special websites that can help with this.
- Make lunch for your friend and their caregiver one day a week. If your friend is getting chemo, ask what they feel like eating.
- Clean your friend's home for an hour every Saturday.
- Care for your friend's lawn or garden twice a month.
- Baby-sit, pet-sit, or take care of your friend's plants.
- Commit to taking their child to soccer practice or music lessons twice a week.
- Return or pick up library books, movies, or books on CD.
- Buy groceries.
- Go to the post office.
- Pick up prescriptions.
- Help make to-do lists.
- Drive family or friends to and from the airport or hotel.

What you can do: How to offer support

Some people find it hard to accept support – even when they need it. Don't be surprised

or hurt if your friend refuses help. It's not you. It's more about pride and their need for independence.

- Provide emotional support through your presence and your touch.
- Help the caregiver. In doing so, you'll help your friend. Many people are afraid of being a burden to their loved ones.
- Offer practical ideas on what you can do to help, and then follow through.
- Assume your help is needed, even if there are others also helping out.
- If your friend needs medical equipment or money for treatment, you can look into getting something donated or organizing ways to help raise money,

What you can do: Gifts

Look for small, practical things your friend may need or just enjoy. Think about what their average day is like and what might make it a little better. It's always good to laugh and smile, too, so look for fun things for your friend.

- Make sure gifts are useful right away. Small gifts given frequently are usually better than large, one-time gifts.
- Give a gift to the caregiver; it's as welcome as a gift to your friend.
- Insist that a thank-you note is not needed.

Suggested ideas:

- Soft or silly socks
- Fun hats or scarves
- Bright, soft washcloths, towels, or sheets
- Silk or satin pillowcases
- Pajamas or a robe
- Unusual toiletries, such as soap and lotion
- Stamped postcards
- Favorite or unusual foods or snacks
- Self-care items, such as a cancer resource book, a special pillow, or a heating pad
- A massage device
- A small cordless phone
- Pictures of friends

- A CD or download of your friend's favorite soothing music or nature sounds
- Funny movies
- Audio books
- Journal or notebook

Everyone, no matter how strong, can benefit from having a friend. Your friend with cancer needs you and your support.

What not to do

- Offer advice they don't ask for or be judgmental.
- Feel you must put up with serious displays of temper or mood swings, You shouldn't accept disruptive or abusive behavior just because someone is ill.
- Assume your co-worker can no longer do the job. They need to feel like a valuable contributing member of the company or department.
- Take things too personally. It's normal for the person with cancer to be quieter than usual, to need time alone, and to be angry at times.
- Be afraid to talk about the illness.
- Always feel you have to talk about cancer. The person with cancer may enjoy conversations that don't involve the illness.
- Be afraid to hug or touch your friend if that was a part of your friendship before the illness.
- Be patronizing or stigmatizing. For example, try not to ask about past behaviors or talk about what might have caused their cancer. And, try not to use a "How sick are you today?" tone when asking how the person is doing.
- Tell the person with cancer, "I can imagine how you must feel," because you really can't.
- Go around someone with cancer if you are sick or have a fever or any other signs of infection.

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