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## **When Someone You Know Has Cancer**

Finding out that someone you know has cancer can be difficult. If you're very close to the person, this can be a frightening and stressful time for you, too. If you are not comfortable talking about cancer, you might not be the best person for your friend to talk with at this time. You may need some time to work through your own feelings. You can even explain to your friend that you are having trouble talking about cancer. You might be able to help them find someone who is more comfortable talking about it by helping them look for support groups or connecting with a community or religious leader.

But if you feel you want to be there to help the person in your life with cancer, here are some suggestions for listening to, talking with, and being around this person. Communication and flexibility are the keys to success.

### **Talking with someone who has cancer**

When talking with someone who has cancer, the most important thing is to listen. Try to hear and understand how they feel. Don't make light of, judge, or try to change the way the person feels or acts. Let them know that you're open to talking whenever they feel like it. Or, if they don't feel like talking right at that time, that's OK, too. You can offer to listen whenever they're ready.

There may be times when the uncertainty and fear make the person with cancer seem angry, [depressed](#)<sup>1</sup>, or withdrawn. This is normal and is a part of the process of grieving what was lost to the cancer (things like health, energy, time). Over time, most people are able to adjust to the new reality in their lives and go forward. Some may need extra help from a support group or a mental health professional to learn to deal with the changes cancer has brought into their lives.

Someone with cancer might feel guilty that they've done something to cause their cancer. Some people are made to feel guilty by others who might ask them if they did

things in the past that might have caused their cancer. This is called **stigma** and can sometimes make a person with cancer blame themselves for their illness or feel left out, isolated, depressed, and as if they don't have much support. It can even affect how they approach their treatment, affect their quality of life, and might make them avoid follow-up care. If someone feels stigmatized for their cancer diagnosis, be reassuring and show you care. Help them know that they can't change what might have happened in the past, but they can take charge of their life and care while going through treatment and beyond.

Some people with cancer might talk about death, worry about their future or their family's future, or talk about their other fears. You don't always have to respond but be ready to hear their pain or the unpleasant thoughts they might want to share. If you are asked your opinion about their illness, treatment, or other parts of their cancer journey, be open and honest, but don't try to answer questions that you don't know the answers to.

You're not alone if you don't know what to say to someone who has cancer. You might not know the person very well, or you may have a close relationship. It can be harder in the workplace because relationships with co-workers are so varied. You might not know the person very well, or you may have worked together for many years and be close friends.

The most important thing you can do is mention the situation in some way that shows your interest and concern. You can express encouragement, and/or you can offer support. Sometimes the simplest expressions of concern are the most meaningful. And sometimes just listening is the most helpful thing you can do.

Try to make your response honest and heartfelt. Here are some ideas:

- "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care".
- "I'm sorry to hear that you are going through this".
- "How are you doing?"
- "If you would like to talk about it, I'm here".
- "Please let me know how I can help".
- "I'll keep you in my thoughts".

While it's good to be encouraging, it's also important not to show false optimism or tell the person with cancer to stay positive. Doing these things might seem to discount their very real fears, concerns, or sad feelings. It's also tempting to say that you know how the person feels. But while you know this is a trying time, no one can know exactly how any person with cancer feels.

Using humor can be an important way of coping. It can also be another approach to support and encouragement. This can be a great way to relieve stress and take a break from the more serious nature of the situation. But you never want to joke unless you know the person with cancer can handle it and appreciate the humor. Let the person with cancer take the lead; it's healthy if they find something funny about a side effect, like hair loss or increased appetite, and you can certainly join them in a good laugh.

If they look good, let them know! Avoid making comments when their appearance isn't as good, such as "You're looking pale," or "You've lost weight." It's very likely that they're acutely aware of it, and they may feel embarrassed if people comment on it.

It's usually best not to share stories about family members or friends who have had cancer. Everyone is different, and these stories may not be helpful. Instead, it's OK to let them know that you are familiar with cancer because you've been through it with someone else. Then they can pick up the conversation from there.

## **Respect the privacy of someone who has cancer**

If someone tells you that they have cancer, you should never tell anyone else unless they have given you permission. Let them be the one to tell others. If someone else asks you about it, you can say something like, "It's not up to me to share this, but I'm sure (\_\_\_\_) will appreciate your concern. I'll let them know you asked about them."

It might feel awkward if you hear through the grapevine that someone has cancer. You could ask the person who told you if it's public information. If it's not, you probably shouldn't say anything to the person with cancer. But if it is public information, don't ignore it. You might say, in a caring way, "I heard what's happening, and I'm sorry."

You may feel angry or hurt if someone who's close to you didn't share the news of a cancer diagnosis with you right away. No matter how close you are, it may take time for the person to adjust to the diagnosis and be ready to tell others. Don't take it personally. Focus on how you can support that person now that you know. For suggestions on how to do this, see [How To Be a Friend To Someone With Cancer](#)<sup>2</sup>.

## **How do I get over feeling uncomfortable around someone who has cancer?**

Feeling sorry for them, or feeling guilty for being healthy yourself, are normal responses. But by turning those feelings into offerings of support, you make the feelings useful. Asking how you can help can take away some of the awkwardness. Cancer is a scary disease. It can create a great deal of uneasiness for people who don't have experience

dealing with it. Don't be ashamed of your own fears or discomfort. Be honest with the person about how you feel. You might find that talking about it is easier than you think.

Cancer often reminds us of our own mortality. If you are close in age to the person with cancer or if you are very fond of them, you may find that this experience creates anxiety for you. You might notice feelings somewhat like those of the person who has cancer: disbelief, sadness, uncertainty, anger, sleeplessness, and fears about your own health. If this is the case, you may want to get support for yourself from a mental health professional or a local support group. If your company has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you can contact a counselor that way. You can also use other sources of counseling, such as your health insurance or religious support services.

## How does someone cope with cancer?

People develop all kinds of coping styles during their lives. Some people are quite private, while others are more open and talk about their feelings. These coping styles help people manage difficult personal situations, although some styles work better than others.

Some people use humor and find it a relief from the serious nature of the illness. But some may become withdrawn and isolated from family and friends. A cancer diagnosis creates a lot of change. People often try to maintain as much control as they can to feel more secure. Some people become very angry or sad. They might be grieving the loss of their healthy self-image, or the loss of control over their lives.

Some people find it helps to simply be hopeful and do what they can to maintain that hope. Hope means different things to different people. And people can hope for many things while facing cancer.

You might assume that someone who is positive and optimistic must be denying the fact that they have cancer. If the person with cancer seems upbeat and unaffected by having cancer, don't assume they're in denial. Making the most of every day may simply be their way of coping. As long as they are getting medical care, they're probably not in denial, and their way of coping with cancer should be respected. For more information, please see [Coping With Cancer in Everyday Life](#)<sup>3</sup>.

There are many sources of support for people facing cancer. These include visitation programs like the American Cancer Society [Reach To Recovery](#)<sup>4</sup> <sup>®5</sup> program for women with [breast cancer](#)<sup>6</sup>. There are local support groups options through the American Cancer Society as well, and even if you're interested in online groups, like the American Cancer Society has a [Cancer Survivors Network](#)<sup>7</sup>, and you can also check out

others such as the [Cancer Support Community](#)<sup>8</sup>, the [Cancer Hope Network](#)<sup>9</sup>, and [CancerCare](#)<sup>10</sup>, to name just a few.

Some of our local offices may be able to [help with transportation](#)<sup>11</sup> and can put you in touch with other sources of support. To find out about [services where your friend live](#)<sup>12</sup>s, contact your American Cancer Society.

## What if the person 's cancer comes back?

In some cases, a person's cancer will come back ([recur or recurrence](#))<sup>13</sup> and treatment might begin again or a new treatment might be needed. The person with cancer may or may not react the same way they did the first time. Again, communication is key. Most people are quite upset if they learn their cancer is back. They may feel they don't have the emotional or physical reserves to get through it again, they might be empowered to be as strong as possible. They may have expected it to come back, or are simply ready to face it again. By equipping yourself with the knowledge of how best to talk to the person with cancer, you can be most helpful to them.

## What if the person refuses or stops cancer treatment?

At some point during a person's cancer journey, they might refuse or decide to stop cancer treatment. You might feel like they're giving up, and that can be upsetting or frustrating. You might not agree with their decision, but it is important to support them and give them the space to decide what they feel is best for their health, well-being, and quality of life.

Even after a person refuses cancer treatment or decides to stop their treatment, it's important to make sure they fully understand their options. You might want to suggest the person to talk with their cancer care team about their decision. Some will and others won't. After talking to their cancer care team, don't be surprised if your loved one still decides to stop or refuse treatment. Continue to offer your support.

[Palliative care](#)<sup>14</sup> can help anyone with cancer, even those who are sure that they don't want treatment for the cancer itself. Palliative care is focused on treating or improving symptoms like pain or nausea, and not the cancer itself. It helps the person feel as good as possible for as long as possible.

The person who refuses or stops cancer care may be open to [hospice](#)<sup>15</sup>. Hospice care treats a person's symptoms so their last days may be spent with dignity and quality, surrounded by their loved ones. Hospice care is also family-centered – it includes the patient and the family in making decisions.

Encourage someone who has stopped or refused cancer treatment to talk to their cancer care team about palliative care and/or hospice.

## Facing the final stages of life

When someone's cancer is no longer [responding to treatment](#)<sup>16</sup>, it can also be a scary time for those close to them. No matter how hard it might be, it's still important to try to be there to give support. Try to follow the cues and stay in the background but be available when they need you.

Some people worry about what to say when a person with cancer talks or asks about dying. Listen to them and be open and honest. Don't try to answer questions that you don't know the answers to. Offer to help them reach out to their health care team. There are no magic words for a person who is dying, but often your presence and support goes a long way,

## Hyperlinks

1. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/depression.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/depression.html)
2. [www.cancer.org/treatment/caregivers/how-to-be-a-friend-to-someone-with-](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/caregivers/how-to-be-a-friend-to-someone-with-)

- [cancer.html](#)
3. [www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/coping.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/coping.html)
  4. [www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services/reach-to-recovery.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services/reach-to-recovery.html)
  5. [www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services/reach-to-recovery.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services/reach-to-recovery.html)
  6. [www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer.html](http://www.cancer.org/cancer/breast-cancer.html)
  7. [csn.cancer.org/](http://csn.cancer.org/)
  8. <http://www.cancersupportcommunity.org>
  9. <http://www.cancerhopenetwork.org>
  10. [www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services/road-to-recovery.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services/road-to-recovery.html)
  11. [www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/support-programs-and-services.html)
  12. [www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/understanding-recurrence.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/survivorship-during-and-after-treatment/understanding-recurrence.html)
  13. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/palliative-care.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/palliative-care.html)
  14. [www.cancer.org/treatment/end-of-life-care/hospice-care.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/end-of-life-care/hospice-care.html)
  15. [www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/planning-managing/if-cancer-treatments-stop-working.html](http://www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/planning-managing/if-cancer-treatments-stop-working.html)

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