



Cancer
Society

LIVING WITH CANCER

Talking to a friend with cancer



A guide for those supporting a friend with cancer





This leaflet has been written for those who have a friend with cancer – who perhaps feel inadequate or unsure of how to provide support.

Most cancer survivors say that they don't know how they'd have got through without the support of family and friends.

Breaking the ice

The prospect of first talking to your friend when you learn of their cancer may seem quite overwhelming.

Cancer can be life-threatening; however, nowadays, many of those who get cancer survive. Books written by survivors give a message of hope. Not only have they lived through the disease, but many have found that the experience has also led to them developing a new sense of purpose in their lives. When cancer cannot be cured, control of symptoms can greatly improve the quality of life of people with cancer.

People need to be listened to, especially when they are troubled. By listening, you can help them to resolve their concerns, or at least put them in perspective. You don't have to be a brilliant conversationalist. You don't have to know all the answers, or even any of them. Just being there and listening is all that may be needed.



What to talk about

People with cancer have good days and bad days, and might not want to talk to you when you visit. They might prefer to talk about everyday things or about what you've been doing, your family, current events, your interests or interests that you share to take them out of themselves. Try to sense their mood and whether it is the right time to chat or be silent.

What your friend is up against

Cancer survivors say the diagnosis and treatment can induce a complex mixture of emotions. These can include fear, anger, bitterness, grief, and sadness. Some of the things that are felt most strongly are to do with fears about the unknown.

The key to understanding is listening. Being a sensitive listener helps you to appreciate what the other person is feeling.

To be a good listener you have to temporarily suppress your own concerns and feelings and tune in to your friend's.

Visiting your friend

Greet your friend as you would normally, take off your coat, and pull up a seat. Try to maintain your friend's privacy – and that of others. In a hospital ward this may not be easy, but position yourself so that it is clear that it's your friend you've come to see. Try to avoid being distracted by any conversations or other activities around you, unless your friend clearly wants to be involved.

Listening is the key

Listen patiently. Nod when it seems appropriate. Don't interrupt. Don't try to finish their sentences.

Think about what your friend is saying, rather than rehearsing your reply. Wait for them to stop speaking before you start, but be relaxed enough to allow them to continue if they interrupt you.

Silence may be appropriate

Your friend may want to be silent for a while, to think about things, or merely to rest from talking. Being quiet yourself may be the right response, as there may not be anything to say.

On the other hand, just looking at each other in silence could be very awkward. You could turn aside or offer to fill their glass with water until it seems right to talk.



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appreciate what the other person is feeling.

Avoid changing the subject

Your friend may want to talk about how they're feeling or may want to express feelings of frustration and anger. Don't just change the subject without telling your friend that you can't handle it.

Resist giving advice

There is nothing more irritating than receiving advice that has not been asked for. When sharing their problems, people are not usually looking for ready-made solutions. They want you to keep 'an open mind and a closed mouth', as one person put it.

It's okay to show your own feelings

You're allowed to say things like, 'I find this difficult to talk about', or, 'I'm not sure what to say'.

Showing your sadness or other emotions helps to clear away embarrassment and helps you talk more openly.



By far the most important thing you can do for your friend is to give your time – to listen, and perhaps to talk.

It's okay to have a laugh

Talking about things that have made you laugh brings people closer together. It helps them bear the discomfort they may be feeling and comfort each other in their grief.

On the other hand, forced humour can be off-putting. Help your friend by replying sensitively to humour. By far the most important thing you can do for your friend is to give your time – to listen, and perhaps to talk.

Supporting your friend

Most people will have a family to care for them. However, some people have no family or have family who cannot provide regular support. This is often a role friends can fulfil.

Ask what you can do

Find out whether or not your help is wanted. Ask if you can bring anything or do anything. Can you get them something to read, a book of crosswords, a DVD, or some music?

Would they like a regular game of cards, Dominoes, or Scrabble? Can you take them anywhere? Do their children or their partner need anything doing for them?

Be realistic about what you can do

Talk with other friends or family members who are supporting your friend and work with them as much as you can.

... And finally

Try not to discuss medical matters or other people's cancer histories. Unless you've been through a similar experience it may not be useful to say 'I know how you feel'.

Gifts are not necessary, especially lavish ones. The key thing to give is your time.

Suggested reading

When Life Becomes Precious – The essential guide for patients, loved ones, and friends of those facing serious illness. Elise NeeDell Babcock. Bantam Books, USA. 1997.

Cancer Etiquette – What to say, what to do when someone you know or love has cancer. Rosanne Kalick. Lion Books, USA. 2005.



Notes

This leaflet was reviewed in February 2008
by the Cancer Society of New Zealand.
The Cancer Society's leaflets are
reviewed every three years.

For more information phone
0800 CANCER (226 237)
or visit: www.cancernz.org.nz