



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 friends with cancer - who might feel unsure about how to talk to them or how to offer support.

Cancer is a serious illness, but nowadays many of those who get cancer survive. When cancer can't be cured, the control of symptoms can greatly improve a person's quality of life.

Most people who have had cancer say that they don't know how they would have got through it without the support of family and friends.

Breaking the ice

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

People need someone to listen, especially when they are upset. By listening you can help your friend to talk about their concerns, which could help them to 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.

The most important thing is not what you say to your friend, it's that you're there for them and you're willing to listen. Try to listen to your friend and let them know that you're there to talk when they feel like it.



What to talk about

People with cancer have good and bad days. Your friend might not want to talk about their treatment when you visit. They might prefer to talk about current events, their hobbies, or what you have been doing lately. This gives them some reprieve from the tough stuff and allows them to think and share everyday things that can make them feel more normal. Try to sense their mood; ask what they'd like to talk about, and whether it's the right time to chat or be silent.

What your friend is up against

People who have had cancer say the diagnosis and treatment can bring up a range 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. Whatever they feel is OK, and telling them that everything will be fine could shut down the conversation.

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

Be aware that offering medical advice or your opinions on things like diet, cancer cures, vitamins, and herbal therapies may not be useful.

Remember that people's needs can change day by day - so keep an open mind, and be prepared that your friend's needs today might be different from their needs yesterday.

Visiting your friend

In the hospital, 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's clear that it's your friend you have come to see. Try to avoid being distracted by any conversations and other activities around you, unless your friend clearly wants to be involved.

Listening is the key

- Be patient. You may hear them going over the same things more than once.
- Nod when it seems appropriate.
- Don't interrupt.
- Don't try to finish their sentences.
- Think about what your friend is saying, rather than rehearse your reply.
- Wait for them to stop speaking before you start, but be relaxed enough to allow them to continue if they interrupt you.
- Listen to *their* story and avoid telling the stories of other people you have known with cancer.

Silence is OK

Your friend may want to be silent for a while to think about things, or merely to rest from talking. If you can be quiet, this 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.

The key to understanding is listening.

Being a sensitive listener helps you to 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, as this in effect says you can't handle it and shuts down the conversation. You could say things like, 'that sounds hard', or, 'oh my, I had no idea', or, 'I'm so pleased you have talked to me about this'.

Resist giving advice

It can be irritating to get advice that you haven't asked for. When sharing their concerns, people are not usually looking for you to solve their problems for them. They want you to keep 'an open mind and a closed mouth', as one person put it. Giving advice often makes the person giving it feel good, but not the person who has to hear it. Do you like to be told what to do?

It's OK to show your own feelings

It's OK to say things like, 'I find this difficult to talk about', or, 'I'm not sure what to say'. Showing your sadness and other emotions helps to clear away any embarrassment you might be feeling and helps you both to talk openly. However, avoid telling your friend that you know how they feel. People with cancer often say they find this unhelpful. Whether or not you have had a similar experience, you can still 'only imagine' how your friend feels. Or you might 'understand but know that their feeling is their feeling'.

It's OK to have a laugh

Talking about things that make you laugh can help you both to deal with the tough time that you're going through. On the other hand, forced humour can be off-putting. Help your friend by replying sensitively to humour.

Support your friend

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

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

Ask what you can do

Find out what would be most helpful for your friend. Ask if you can bring them something or do something for them. Can you get them something to read, a book of crosswords, a DVD, or some music?

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

Some people find it hard to accept help, even if they need it. Try not to be upset or take it personally if your friend doesn't want your help. It's not you - it's more often about your friend's pride, or your friend not wanting to be a burden. They may also feel a desire to be independent.

Be realistic about what you can do

Talk with other people who are supporting your friend and work with them as much as you can.

If you offer to do something, make sure it's realistic so that you avoid letting your friend down. You could offer to:

- do your friend's shopping or other household tasks

- set up a roster with other supporters and make regular meals for your friend (check first if there are certain foods they need to avoid)
- drive your friend to their appointments, or set up a roster of friends. Always check that this is OK first
- take your friend's children to after-school activities, or offer to babysit so that your friend can have a night off.

... and finally

Try not to discuss other people's cancer histories.

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

Suggested reading

If you would like more information about supporting someone with cancer, there are many useful books available.

Books written by people who have had cancer give a message of hope. Not only have they lived through the disease, but many have found that the experience has led to their developing a new sense of purpose in their lives.

Many Cancer Society offices have libraries where you can borrow books at no charge. You can also ring our free Cancer Information Helpline

0800 CANCER (0800 226 237) for suggestions.

Our staff will help you to find useful resources, and answer any cancer questions you may have.

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

Supporting someone with cancer/Te manaaki i tētahi e māuiui ana nā te matepukupuku - A guide for partners, family/whānau and friends. Cancer Society of New Zealand, New Zealand. 2016.

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
Society

Notes

This leaflet was reviewed in February 2017
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