



Interacting with Someone with Cancer

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Knowing what to say to someone who has been diagnosed with cancer can be hard. Talking to someone with cancer often creates fears of saying something inappropriate or making the person upset. As a result, many people talk in whispers or say nothing at all. This publication provides tips on ways to communicate and interact with someone living with cancer. Keep in mind that each person experiences cancer differently—even the same type of cancer—so the same approach may not work for everyone.

What Do I Say?

Family members, friends, loved ones, and co-workers often wonder what to say to someone who has been diagnosed with cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, some of the confusion stems from personal fears and uneasiness with this daunting disease. For others it is a reminder of personal mortality. People living with cancer have voiced that they do not like their cancer to be ignored, and they do not find it helpful to hear, “I know how you feel.” No one really knows exactly how someone with cancer feels because cancer and treatment affect each person differently.



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The American Cancer Society encourages you to “respond from the heart” and offers the following conversation starters and suggestions:

- “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.”

Cancer survivors have taught us that people sometimes say things without realizing that their words are offensive or inappropriate. People want to communicate well, but they don’t always know what to say. Use this guide



as a starting point for talking to someone about their cancer. Talk about the situation in a way that feels most comfortable to you, expressing care, concern, encouragement, and support.

The following “cancer etiquette” tips from the American Cancer Society, the Mayo Clinic, and the Cancer Treatment Centers of America can help you feel more comfortable talking to someone who has cancer.

Stay connected

Don’t ignore the person or the cancer. Having cancer can be lonely and isolating. Rather than ignoring the person, tell them, “I am here for you,” “I am thinking about you,” “I love you,” or “I am keeping you in my thoughts.” It is also okay to say, “I don’t know what to say,” which is better than saying nothing. Speak from your heart.

Choose your words wisely

One simple comment meant to inspire can quickly unwind a person’s attitude and/or emotions. Some cancer patients may be motivated by and find strength in clichés, but others interpret common cancer descriptions such as “brave,” “fighter,” “warrior,” and “inspirational” as additional pressure. One woman shared with the BBC News that she felt if she “lost her battle” to breast cancer, that it would be because she had not fought hard enough or because she gave up. Another woman said that she did not feel “brave” or “inspirational,” but that she was trying to live the life she had left well.

Before you speak, think about what you would need or want to hear. In addition, think about the person living with cancer and use language appropriate to him/her. Remember that they may not think like you and may not be comforted by the same words that would comfort you.



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Remind yourself you are not the one with cancer

Avoid talking about your stressful day or your aches and pains. The person with cancer needs the energy to fight their fight instead of comforting you. Keep your focus on your friend/loved one and what they want to talk about. Talk about their cancer if they want to, and ignore it temporarily if they don’t.

Laugh

Share funny stories. Tell jokes. Laughing and giggling is a healthy form of stress relief. In the short-term, laughter increases the intake of oxygen-rich air, which is good for our body. Laughter also decreases heart rate and blood

pressure, which creates a relaxed feeling. Long-term effects of laughter include an improved immune system, pain relief, and enhanced mood. Laughter can also help make difficult situations more tolerable and can connect people.

Act normal

A person living with cancer does not want to hear pity in your voice or see it in your eyes. Just tell the patient you are glad to see them. Share a story about something funny that has happened. Allow your loved one or friend to talk about cancer if he or she wants to. If you hugged or touched before the disease, continue to do so if it does not cause pain or discomfort.

Be a good listener

Don't just listen; actually hear what the person is saying. Concentrate and process their words. Do not interrupt. You don't have to have answers. Be empathic. It is okay to sit in silence together.

Don't minimize their experience

You don't know that the person will be "fine" so don't say that. Instead, say, "I am sorry this is happening," or "I hope everything will be okay." Remember, there is no "good" cancer so don't downplay what they are going through or what kind of cancer they have. Encourage the person to talk about fears and concerns. Let them feel sad.

Follow their lead

Some people will be very open and want/need to talk about their cancer treatment and experience, and others will remain private. You do not always have to talk about cancer. Sometimes a person will want a break from cancer and an opportunity to feel "normal." In those moments, exchange a funny story or talk about the day.

Be considerate

Do not ask how many tumors they have, what stage of cancer they are in, or how many months the doctor gave them to live. If a person wants you to know these things, they will share them.

Just because a person has cancer does not mean that they cannot be helpful or don't want to be included in regular activities. Treat the person like you always have and include them on projects, tasks, and social events.

Make them feel needed and important

Just because a person has cancer does not mean that they cannot be helpful or don't want to be included in regular activities. Treat the person like you always have and include them on projects, tasks, and social events. Let them tell you if they feel that they cannot do it or won't be able to keep up.

According to University of Minnesota researchers, "living on purpose feels alive, clear and authentic." Having a purpose positively influences physical health, protects against heart disease, helps with pain management, and leads to better relationships. A sense of purpose can also help people find meaning in things that happen to them.

Share encouraging stories

Cancer patients like to hear cancer survivor stories, but do not say, “they had the same thing as you” because no two cancers are exactly the same. Instead, share a story that connects two people with similar diseases or use the story to let the person know you are familiar with cancer because you have been through it with another person. Avoid stories with unhappy endings.

Be careful with humor

Humor often helps in coping with tough situations, but it is not everyone’s approach to coping. Let the person with cancer take the lead. It is better to join them in laughter than to risk a joke that is not well-received.

Be honest

You are not an expert in cancer or dealing with it. It is okay to tell the person that you do not have experience with this situation and that you are scared or that you do not know what to

say or do. Ask the person with cancer how they want you to interact with them.

Show respect

You may disagree with a treatment plan or decision, but it is important to respect the patient’s wishes and decisions.

Respect privacy

If someone tells you they have cancer, or shares details of their journey, it is not your job to tell others. If someone has not told you and you heard through the grapevine, don’t take it personally. It can take time for people to adjust to the diagnosis and feel ready to talk about it.

If you talk about their appearance, mean what you say

Don’t comment on complexion, weight, or hair loss. Instead, tell the person he or she is beautiful or looking stronger (only if you mean it).



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What Can I Do?

It is normal to feel sorry for someone with cancer or even to feel guilty that you are healthy. Turn those awkward but sincere feelings into support. The American Cancer Society offers the following suggestions for things that you can DO for someone living with cancer:

Be assertive

Instead of saying, “Let me know if there is anything that I can do,” actually DO something. It is rare for someone to ask for help...so just do what needs to be done. Babysit, drive to and sit through a treatment, get pedicures together, clean house, run errands, deliver dinner, coordinate a visitation schedule, or plan a party when treatment is over.

Be normal

Shower your loved one with love and normalcy. Show your loved one that you care and that they are still needed. Include them in activities and events and keep inviting them unless they tell you otherwise.

Be honorable

Make or organize a contribution to a charity, participate in a race for a cure, organize a blood drive, or make other special efforts in their name. Be sure to respect the feelings and wishes of the person with cancer.

You are not alone if you do not know what to say or do when someone has cancer. But do not further isolate the person living with cancer by doing or saying nothing. By using the above tips for interacting, you can find ways to express your interest and concern, provide encouragement, and offer support.

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