

How you can help a friend or coworker with cancer

Source: [Canadian Cancer Society](#)

Finding out that someone you know has cancer often comes as a shock. Perhaps you've never been through something like this with a friend or family member. What should you say? What should you do? How should you act?

There are many ways you can help someone who has cancer.

Listen first

Not sure what to say? That's OK. Sometimes your friend may not even want to talk. But that doesn't mean they don't want you there. Often it's enough just to sit quietly with your friend. Your company is what matters most. When neither of you feels like talking, you can still be supportive by doing things together. Take an easy walk, watch a movie, listen to music – do whatever it is that first brought you together.

If your friend wants to talk, be ready to listen. If you don't know what to say, let them lead. There's no need to offer advice or opinions unless you're asked. So take the pressure off yourself. Just be there for your friend.

Don't worry that you'll say the wrong thing

At some point you have to talk – even if it makes you feel awkward. There are no perfect words, but “What are you feeling?” can be a much better conversation starter than “How are you feeling?” Your response will be fine if you use words that show interest, concern, encouragement and support.

You might also start with:

- I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know that I care about you.
- I'm thinking of you.
- I'm sorry that you're going through this.

There are some things that people with cancer don't want to hear. It's not very helpful to be told that someone else had the same cancer and it was horrible, or they shouldn't worry because they have a “good kind of cancer.” And even if you've had cancer, remember that everyone's experience is different. So try not to say that you know exactly how your friend feels.

Learn about the type of cancer your friend has

Cancer comes in many forms. Each can have different effects. Your friend may not wish to explain theirs to you because it's draining emotionally and physically to do so again and again.

Learn about more than 100 [types of cancer](#).

You could also ask their caregiver or a mutual friend for the important facts. But don't assume you now know it all. Cancer and its treatment affects everyone differently.

Prepare yourself for changes in how your friend looks and acts. They may have lost some hair or gained weight, or they may be exhausted from treatment. Ask yourself how you felt the last time you were scared or very sick. How did you want to be treated? Follow your own advice.

Make sure the time is right for you to visit

A visit to your friend can boost their spirits and yours, plus give caregivers a much-needed break. Just remember always to contact them first and be sure they're up to it. Give them a chance to say no.

Understand too that their decision may change when you arrive. Never take it personally if your friend or caregiver is suddenly too tired, cranky or ill for a visit. Tell them it's OK and you'll call again to make plans for a visit another time.

Visit only if you have enough time. Feeling hurried isn't helping either of you. Turn off your phone and put it away. Then give your friend your undivided attention.

When you visit, you might try to make future plans together. It gives your friend something to look forward to and both of you something fun to talk about.

Let your friend be sad

Don't be afraid to laugh and have fun with your friend – but allow emotional space for any sadness too. Even if treatment is going well, your friend may start talking about serious things like funeral plans. You can help by listening. Then encourage your friend to talk things over with their family and loved ones.

It's important to let your friend talk about feeling sad or upset. It can be tempting to try to cheer them up by saying things like, "Of course you'll be fine; try to be positive," but it could make your friend stop talking about what they are really feeling. It can really help to just listen while your friend talks about what they want to talk about, even if it's distressing for you. If you find the topic too hard, you can say so and offer to try to talk about it later. Don't simply change the subject without acknowledging the fact that what your friend is talking about is important.

If your friend cries, don't try to stop them. Reassure them that it's OK to cry. As upsetting as it is for you to watch, tears are a natural response to distress and may be a very important release for your friend.

Be specific when you offer to help

When a person has cancer, they are often overwhelmed emotionally and physically. You want to help. Instead of asking what you can do, be specific.

Say “I’m going shopping. Can I get you anything at the grocery store or pick up your prescriptions?” Or “Can I look after your kids for a couple of hours on the weekend or after school?”

Make sure your friend agrees that your idea is helpful. There are lots of practical ways to help:

- Walk the dog. Feed their cat.
- Do the laundry. Clean their home. Pick up the mail.
- Shovel the snow. Rake the leaves. Put up or take down holiday decorations.
- Mow the lawn. Weed the garden. Water the plants.
- Bring ready-made meals to freeze and reheat later.
- Drive your friend to and from medical appointments.

Are the holidays coming up? Everyone is busy, which means your friend may need you more than ever. Support might mean helping with the practical stuff – offer to pick up gifts, prepare special foods or take a child to school events. Or it might mean recognizing that your friend doesn’t feel much like celebrating anything right now.

When you’ve said you will do something, do it. But if you’re sick, the most helpful thing you can do is keep your cold or flu germs to yourself. Reschedule the help you’ve offered or see if someone else can fill in for you.

Don’t forget that their caregivers need help, too

Being the main support for someone with cancer can be exhausting. By helping their caregiver, you’re supporting that friend who has cancer. So it’s great if you can think of something practical you can do to help the caregiver or some other way to offer the caregiver support.

Why not organize all the help that people like you are offering?

Go online and search for “helping calendars” or “free online meal calendars.” You can schedule the chores that need to be done in your friend’s home and divide them among well-wishers. Or schedule people’s visits to your friend. They often want to come at the same time. Be the point person who makes your friend’s life a bit easier.

If you can do some chores or organize people doing chores, your friend and their family can focus on treatment and resting.

Maybe bring a small gift

To be clear, your attention and presence is the best present you can give. So you are not expected to bring a gift, ever.

But if you’re feeling uncomfortable and aren’t sure what to say, giving something small can go a long way. (A simple greeting card can do it for you.) It doesn’t have to be expensive.

Something personal, like photographs of you together, a child's drawing or a video message from a group of friends or family, can get you talking.

Here are a few other ideas:

- magazines, books, music or DVDs ?
- gift cards for restaurants, groceries or gas ?
- note cards or a journal ?
- gift certificates for a housecleaning service ?
- pajamas or a robe ?

Be careful about giving (or wearing) anything with a scent. This includes body lotion, perfume, aftershave and some strong-smelling laundry detergents. People are sometimes very sensitive to scent when they're having chemotherapy. So you may want to check first before giving flowers or plants as well.

Are you living far from your friend? Mailing a gift from a distance provides a great reason to call to make sure they received it. Then, if they're up to it, you can visit by phone.

Keep offering even after others stop

Cancer treatment and recovery can take a long time. People are often offered lots of help in the beginning, but the goodwill fades over time. Be the friend who keeps offering help and support.

Sometimes cancer comes back. If it does, your friend may react and cope differently than the first time. The help and support they need may be different this time too. Talk about how you can help before doing the same things you did the last time they had cancer.

Understand that every diagnosis is unique

Each cancer diagnosis is different. So is the reaction of everyone diagnosed. Your friend can be feeling any of a wide variety of emotions. Those feelings and outlooks can change daily or even hourly.

You simply cannot predict how they are feeling or know what they're going through. Respect your friend's moods and respect how they choose to cope.

And remember where we started. Just sitting and listening is among the best things you can do for them.