

# How can I help?

Supporting someone with cancer



When a person you know is diagnosed with cancer, you might want to talk to them about it. It can sometimes be difficult to find the right words. You may be worried about saying the wrong thing.

It's normal to feel lost for words, no matter how close you are with the person who has cancer. There isn't one perfect script – what you say will probably depend on your relationship and your own experiences.

This brochure provides information about what a person with cancer may be going through. It also offers ideas about what you might say and do.

**“The whole time I was on chemotherapy and radiotherapy, my friend called me everyday between 8-9am. She could hear if I was well by my voice. There aren't many friends like that around.”** *Patient*

# Be understanding

Everyone's experience of cancer is unique. Even if you've had cancer yourself, you probably still can't grasp exactly what another person with cancer is going through. One thing you can do is to try to be empathetic and relate to them. Your support can be important during this time.

A person with cancer may experience:

**A flood of emotions** – When the future is uncertain, a person can feel a whole range of emotions, including fear, worry, anger or sadness. A cancer diagnosis can sometimes lead a person to consider their life and even their own mortality from a new perspective.

**Physical side effects** – A person having treatment may be coping with side effects such as nausea, vomiting, skin sensitivity, infections and hair loss. Some side effects such as fatigue can be significant and ongoing.

**Practical concerns** – Cancer can also bring changes to a person's life. They may re-evaluate their financial plans and goals and/or their employment situation. A person's sense of independence may change, depending on whether they are able to keep up with their previous daily activities.

**Isolation** – Even if the person with cancer is surrounded by family and friends, they may sometimes still feel lonely.





## Some helpful ideas

### There are many ways to show your concern or offer support:

**Ask “How are you going now?”** – Try to ask how the person is feeling from time to time throughout their treatment and recovery. Make the time to really listen and respond to their answer.

**Tell them if you’re willing to listen** – Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs most. If the person wants to talk about what they are going through, give them time to speak, make eye contact and try not to interrupt.

**Acknowledge life can be unfair** – A person with cancer doesn’t want to feel blamed or punished. It may help to recognise that sometimes bad things can happen to good people.

**Keep them involved** – Continue inviting the person with cancer to the usual social events and let them have the option of declining or cancelling, even at the last minute. This helps them feel included and lets them make their own choices.

“It was so sweet when people sent me cards and flowers. It gave me the sense that everyone cared about me and really missed me, which brightened up my days.” *Patient*

**Show them you care** – You might send a card, deliver flowers or say something in person. If you don’t know exactly how to express your feelings, it’s okay to just say so.

**Maintain the status quo** – If physical affection like hugging or hand holding was a normal part of your relationship before the cancer diagnosis, try to continue acting normally.

**Follow their lead** – Some people with cancer don’t like to be called a cancer sufferer, battler, victim or survivor. Pay attention to how they refer to themselves and follow suit.

**Talk about other things too** – Although it’s important to ask how they’re feeling, the person with cancer may not want to talk about cancer all the time. It’s okay to chat about other things happening in both of your lives.

**Offer suggestions about how you can help** – Sometimes it’s hard for someone with cancer to ask for practical help. Your specific offer might be gratefully received. E.g. “Can I bring dinner over on Saturday night?” or “Would you like me to mind the kids on treatment days?”.



### Practical ways to help

- Go grocery shopping.
- Help with cleaning or laundry.
- Do some gardening.
- Mind children or pets.
- Make dinner.
- Drive to treatment.

## What is less helpful



### When you're trying to support someone, you may want to avoid:

#### **Saying clichés or unrealistic assurances –**

Even though you might mean to be reassuring, saying “don’t worry” or “stay positive” can seem dismissive of how the person is feeling. It may also be unrealistic – of course the person may worry, and so might you. It’s normal to feel concerned.

**Offering unsolicited advice –** The person with cancer needs to make their own decisions based on the advice of their medical team. If you’d like to share your opinion with the person, ask them if it would be helpful first.

**Pushing particular beliefs –** All people have the right to their own beliefs and values, both religious and non-religious. The person with cancer also has the right to make their own decision about their treatment and their life.

**Asking probing questions –** The person may not want to tell you about something personal (e.g. their prognosis) and their privacy should be respected.



#### **Sayings to avoid**

- “Everything is going to be all right.”
- “I know exactly how you feel.”
- “Don’t worry about it.”
- “How long do you have to live?”
- “Just relax, don’t get worked up.”
- “It will all work out in the end.”

**Making observations –** It’s not always helpful to say, “you’ve lost weight” or “you don’t look very sick”. The person may be aware of it and pointing it out may make them feel self-conscious.

**Sharing lots of stories –** You may know other friends or family members who have also had cancer, but this person may want to focus on their own health. Every person’s situation is different so comparing stories may not always be helpful. It’s better to ask first – e.g. “Do you want to hear about a study I read about?”.

**Breaching confidentiality –** Respect the person’s privacy and ask their permission before you share details about their health or treatment with anyone else. Try not to be offended if the person doesn’t choose to confide in you.

**Drawing comparisons –** The person with cancer may be given more flexibility than usual in their work or home life because of their illness. They’re usually just getting help to make life as manageable as possible.

**“I get sick of people telling me to think positive or be happy. Some days I really don’t feel positive and I feel pressured to appear that way for everyone else.”** *Patient*



## Treat each other well

Like everyone, a person with cancer will probably have good and bad days. It's important to try to understand the extra pressures and changes a cancer diagnosis can bring, and how it might impact a person's emotions. However, illness is not an excuse for mistreatment. Respect and safety are important in caring relationships.

If you're concerned about the behaviour of the person with cancer, try to talk to them or consider seeing a counsellor to discuss other strategies.

## Talk about it

It can be difficult to watch someone you care about go through a serious illness. You can call the Helpline to talk about how you're feeling or to ask any questions. Speaking to a social worker or counsellor may also be helpful.



**Cancer  
Council**  
**13 11 20**

For information and support on cancer-related issues, call Cancer Council **13 11 20**. This is a confidential service.