

Helping with the Fight: Supporting Friends and Family with Cancer

When we find out that someone we care about has been diagnosed with cancer -- whether it's a family member, friend or coworker, we feel for what they're going through, and naturally want to help in any way we can. But often we don't know what we can say or do to help. Here are some suggestions on what we can do to give them valuable support in this difficult time.

Deal with Your Own Feelings First

While we want to help, we are faced with our own set of difficult emotions and fears. What will happen to them? How are they handling this? What will they need to go through to get better? If they are a close family member, or if we are to be their primary caregiver, the feelings are even more intense: Will I be able to care for them? How will my life change? We can best be supportive of them if we've come to terms with our own feelings first. It is good to talk it out with supportive family and friends, or a counselor, and continue addressing the issues as they come up, so we can be there to support them.



Express Your Concern

When you first learn that someone has cancer, simply acknowledging what they are going through and expressing your concern can be the most meaningful things to say. Some respectful options are acknowledging the situation, offering to listen, letting them know you're available to help, being open with your feelings, and asking how the person is doing. As one cancer patient wrote: "Simple comments, even clichés, are fine: 'I'm thinking of you' never gets old. 'That cancer doesn't have a chance against you' is empowering. 'I'm rooting for you' feels good."

Consciously Listen

The best thing we can do is often the simplest: just listen to them. Often we feel helpless, because we can't "fix" the situation. But if we offer an open ear and allow the person with cancer to express their concerns and fears, we are often giving them what they need most. It may often make us feel uncomfortable to hear them speak about uncomfortable topics, such as death, but it is one of the greatest gifts we can give them, to have the comfort of sharing, without being told, "just don't think about that." Good listening tips are: don't judge, don't interrupt, and listen with your eyes and your body language, as well as your ears.



Learn as Much as You Can

Having good information helps us feel empowered to help, and helps the person with cancer ease some of the "anxiety of the unknown" the disease can cause. It is helpful to have a grasp on the type of cancer they have, the treatment options, and the prognosis. Research your loved one's disease online, ask your cancer center for information, and ask questions and take notes at your doctors' appointments. Good information will help us be realistic about expectations, so that we can be prepared, and can give us more resources to be a "listening ear" when they have to make decisions.



Give "Hands-On" Services

There are practical things we can do to help the person with cancer. With a family member, we can attend appointments with them, take a notepad, and ask questions and advocate for them. With friends, neighbors and coworkers, we can bring over food, clean the house, help with shopping, help run errands or raise funds to help them defray medical expenses. Here's where a group of friends, all doing something small, adds up to a big support. We'll want to be sensitive to what the individual needs, asking first if they need help. If they don't, we can ask how we can support the family, who is also going through a difficult time.

Help Them to Find Support

Our concern and empathy can help, but sometime's there's no substitution for the support of someone else who knows, from the inside out, what the person with cancer is going through. There are many forms of support groups out there for cancer patients -- try checking with the hospital or with the Mental Health Association. If more help is needed, suggest a counselor to help the patient cope with feelings and emotions. You may not personally be able to provide all the assistance the cancer patient needs, but you can help find them additional resources.



Help the Cause

We can help in the long run by doing our part in the community. We can donate to local fundraisers and charities. We can raise community awareness while helping to generate contributions, by participating in cancer awareness and fundraiser events. We can donate our time to local cancer clinics or hospitals. These are all important ways to supporting the cause of providing for cancer patients and researching new treatments. The hospital or the local branch of the American Cancer Society can be a great place to start, and to see where you can make a difference.

With good support, we can give family and friends with cancer valuable support in the challenging fight they have ahead.

For more information, visit:

The American Cancer Society <http://www.cancer.org/>

Cancer Support Group of Cincinnati <http://www.cancersupportcincinnati.org/>

Association of Cancer Online Resources <http://www.acor.org/>

