

Tips for Supporting Friends and Families with Cancer

*Courtesy of the Mind Body Medicine Department
Cancer Treatment Centers of America at Midwestern Regional Medical Center*

The impact of a cancer diagnosis is immediate. There are physical changes and emotional challenges to contend with, and treatment regimens may make a patient feel sicker. But support from friends and family is often the factor that helps patients endure rigorous medical treatments. But what do you say? What do you do? Where do you begin? If you are a friend or a family member of someone with cancer, read on for a few simple support tips.

Allow Your Loved One To Be in Charge When Possible

People with cancer often feel anxious about the loss of control that accompanies their diagnosis. Families can be most supportive by giving back that control and allowing the person to make choices for herself. If you find that you want to do things for her to ease your own feelings of helplessness, remember that the best thing you can do is follow her lead. For example, if your wife wants to cook dinner despite feeling a little weak, let her do it, even if you think it may tire her. The sense of control she gains from that simple task far outweighs the physical distress she might experience.

Know that Being Together Really Helps

Spending time with you, even without doing anything in particular, can be a tremendous comfort to the person with cancer. Knowing that you want to be there makes him feel loved and supported.

Make Room for All Feelings

There is a common misperception that people with cancer must act in a positive manner at all times; this approach can make the patient believe that he shouldn't express any difficult feelings. Even if it's difficult, make room for whatever feelings come up. Remember that the person with cancer won't necessarily follow any particular emotional style and may feel different emotions at different times. He may be sad, angry, fearful, or confused, and at times he might cry. Expressing all his feelings, especially the painful ones, is good for him. Be open to it, and respond with interest and compassion.

Listen, But Don't Push the Person to Talk

It's especially important not to push a person with cancer to open up. Let her decide when it's time to talk and what she wants to talk about. Be available and watch for cues that she wants to talk. Be sure to follow her agenda rather than your own. If you find yourself needing to talk, find a supportive person who can respond to your needs.

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Encourage Positive Self-Caretaking Motives

Sometimes people respond to a cancer diagnosis with positive motives to take good care of themselves. This can include turning to close relationships for comfort and support, and seeking out the best possible medical care. Other times, they may respond with unhappy motives such as becoming isolated, eating a lot of junk food, or blaming themselves for their disease. It's most helpful for you to watch for and respond to the patient's positive motives. If she responds with unhappy motives, it's ok, but watch for opportunities to re-engage her positive motives.

Recognize that Family Roles Might Change

While it's important for a person with cancer to keep his routine, know that a cancer diagnosis may disrupt family roles: kids might have to take on more household responsibilities, or a father may have to take on additional childcare duties. In addition to acknowledging the change and mourning the loss, you may find it helpful to identify some practical solutions. For example, it might make sense to relax housekeeping standards or prepare simpler meals. You may also want to consider enlisting outside help from friends and acquaintances.

Be Prepared to Communicate to Healthcare Professionals

Dealing with the health care system can be confusing, frustrating, and intimidating. However, by learning to communicate well with your loved one's health care providers, you can be a more effective caretaker and advocate. It contributes to the sense of teamwork and encourages professionals to be more responsive. You can begin by educating yourself about the patient's condition. Also, be prepared and organized when meeting with medical personnel: provide complete and accurate information about the patient's condition, bring a list of questions, ask for clarification if needed, and be appropriately assertive.

Maintain Routine as Much as Possible

Following familiar routines can be very helpful to a person with cancer. Even though his schedule may be disrupted by medical appointments and by his need for more rest periods, it will likely be important for him to continue as many of his regular daily activities as possible to maintain a sense of normalcy.

Remember to Take Care of Yourself

Families can be more effective caregivers if they take good care of themselves. Be sure to get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, and take part in activities that you enjoy. It's also important to remember that emotional support is just as important for you as it is for your loved one; you can find it through friends, co-workers, a religious community, support groups, or a professional counselor.