

FRIENDS



THROUGH THICK



AND THIN



Friends help form the fabric of our lives. We share good times, bad times, laughter, tears, struggles, victories, and much more. As life changes and unfolds, friendships also evolve.

When a cancer diagnosis enters the picture, you may find yourself navigating new territory with your friends, as relationships shift and new ones emerge. Though this process can be difficult, learning a few new rules of the road can help patients and their friends continue to benefit from the joy and the support that friendship can provide.

Be Real

Here's the thing about cancer: it can be the elephant in the room. While some friends will rally around, others may fall by the wayside. It's not that these floundering friends are bad people or bad friends. More often they don't know what to say or do in the face of cancer.

In fact, one study indicated that 72 percent of respondents reported that they were treated differently after they were diagnosed with cancer.¹ And that's exactly what cancer patients *don't* want.

"Cancer patients need friends and acquaintances to be natural and to treat them just as they did before the diagnosis," explains Reverend Michael Langham, director of pastoral care at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA) in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Patient Kirk Taylor echoes this sentiment: "We want to be treated as normally as we can. I tell people, 'I'm not contagious. You can call me. You can come over.'"

Kirk, who lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife, Kathy, was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer in 2009. Before his diagnosis he was an avid hunter and fisherman, and he enjoyed his annual hunting trips with friends. His cancer treatment has interfered with those trips during the past two years, and now he notices that his friends no longer invite him. He misses those trips—both for the hunting and for the camaraderie of friends.

Like many cancer patients, Kirk is living with cancer, enduring periods when he feels crummy and periods when he feels good. He knows his limits. His advice to friends of cancer patients: "Don't shut the door so quickly to any activity. Keep asking. Don't exclude this person from your plans just because they have cancer. Let them exclude themselves if they need to."

Be Positive

"Right after I was diagnosed, my neighbor came over and told me, 'I've had cancer for nine years; it's not a death sentence,'" Kirk recalls. "I



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This kind of positive encouragement is critical to cancer patients. “Tell people they look great. It makes a difference,” says Laurey Masterton.

At age 57 Laurey is a two-time cancer survivor now battling stage IV colon cancer. She owns a successful catering company and café in Asheville, North Carolina, and is an author, beekeeper, and vibrant member of her community. Laurey’s motto is *Don’t postpone joy*. She embodies this philosophy and expects nothing less from the people surrounding her.

“When people ask me what they can do for me, I tell them to plan on coming to my five-year party,” Laurey says. “In other words, help me believe that I’m going to get really far along.”

She also says that it’s important for friends not to be scared of the cancer patient. “I’ve jokingly compared myself to Casper the

Laurey is forward thinking—planning for her future, letting go of the friendships that no longer feed her, and holding tight to those that do. She’s in the driver’s seat, fighting cancer but also making proactive choices about her life and her relationships.

Friendly Ghost,” she laughs.

And although she jokes about it, Laurey is serious about avoiding the fear and the negativity that some people can bring to the table when a friend is diagnosed with cancer. As a result, she avoids negative people at all costs and has carved out an inner circle of friends who provide an uplifting sense of support. They’re already planning a celebratory, post-treatment trip to Moab, Utah, later this year.

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Reach Out

“Sometimes the patient has to take the lead and initiate activities and assignments,” explains Steve White, LCSW, a mind-body therapist at CTCA in Phoenix, Arizona. “Patients have to give direction because their friends don’t know what to do.”

This may seem counterintuitive to cancer patients who are focused on regaining their health, but

White says it’s common for friends to hold back a little and wait for a signal from the patient. Depending on the nature of the friendship, White recommends being direct with friends: “You can say, ‘Don’t treat me with kid gloves. If I don’t have the stamina to do something, I’ll tell you.’”

If you haven’t heard from a friend, White recommends picking up the phone and saying something like, “I haven’t heard from you in a while, and I wondered if you were afraid of disturbing me—or if maybe you’re a little afraid of my cancer.”

White says this direct approach opens the door to communication and continued friendship, which can be critical for support during this time. It’s also important to recognize which friendships are worth nurturing, however, and which may be better to let go.

Let Go

“Some people just don’t have the emotional strength to deal with cancer,” explains White, “so they disappear from the patient’s life.”

Rev. Langham insists that it’s important to focus on the friends who are there rather than those who



Communication Is Key

What to say and do when a friend has cancer

When a friend is facing cancer, it can be difficult to know what to say. As a result, we often choose to say nothing—or, worse, the wrong thing. If a friend is battling cancer, take a deep breath and think before you speak. Some general guidelines:

DON'T

- Don't use well-meaning but trite phrases such as, "Everything will work out" and "God has a plan."
- Don't say, "I know just how you feel" or "I understand." Unless you have endured the exact same thing, you really don't know how the person feels.
- Don't make comparisons such as "My Aunt Sally had cancer, and she had treatment X." Cancer comes in many varieties, and different people need different treatment. Let the doctors do the doctoring and instead focus on being a friend.
- Don't trivialize the pain with such phrases as "It's just hair; it will grow back."
- Don't pity the patient.

DO

- Listen. Just simply listen with an open heart. Maintain eye contact and be present for your friend.
- Say, "I'm sorry you're going through this. I am here for you." And be there.
- Be natural. Treat your friend in the same way you always have.
- Maintain regular contact. Your friend may feel too tired or ill to socialize, but continue to check in and let him or her know you are there.
- Extend invitations to social events and let him or her say yes or no as appropriate. Social outings provide an opportunity to take a break from focusing on cancer. Your friend will appreciate the invitation even if he or she cannot attend. Don't exclude your friend.
- Incorporate humor when possible. Laughter can be very uplifting.
- Be specific. Rather than saying, "Let me know if there is anything I can do," say, "I have free time on Monday mornings; can I mow your lawn and pick up your groceries?"
- Make plans for the future. This gives your friend something to look forward to and also indicates that you plan on sticking around for the duration.
- Be positive and encouraging.

are not. "Cancer patients need to use their energy to fight cancer and to nurture the relationships that are solid," he says. "They don't have the energy to go after those that are falling away."

Kirk knows this firsthand. Cancer has given him the opportunity to take stock of his friendships. "Cancer gives you a lot of hindsight," he says. "With time you can decide if the relationship is worth rekindling."

Hold Tight

If cancer has a way of clearing out the fair-weather friends, it also has a way of deepening relationships with true friends. "Sometimes friends become closer and sometimes you lose friends," White says. "Sometimes you realize how many friends you have. A lot of people come forward that you didn't even know you had as friends."

The bottom line: we all get by with a little help from our friends, especially in the face of cancer. **cfThrive**

Reference

1. Benjamin HH. *From Victim to Victor: For Cancer Patients and Their Families*. New York: Dell; 1989.