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When Someone You Know Has Cancer

Finding out that someone you know has cancer can be difficult. If you're very close to the person, this can be a shocking and stressful time for you, too. If you are not comfortable talking about cancer, you might not be the best person for your friend to talk with at this time.

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You may need some time to work through your own feelings. You can even explain to your friend that you are having trouble talking about cancer. You might be able to help them find someone who is more comfortable talking about it by helping them look for support groups or connecting with a community or religious leader.

But if you feel you want to be there to help, here are some suggestions for listening to, talking with, and being around this person. Communication and flexibility are the keys to success.

Talking with someone who has cancer

When talking with someone who has cancer, the most important thing is to **listen**. Try to hear and understand how they feel. Don't make light of, judge, or try to change the way the person feels or acts. Let them know that you're open to talking whenever they feel like it. Or, if they don't feel like talking right at that time, that's OK, too. You can offer to

- "Please let me know how I can help".
- "I'll keep you in my thoughts".

The person with cancer may have concerns or may not feel as hopeful sometimes. You may not be able to truly say that you know how the person with cancer feels. But, it's good to offer encouragement to make them feel better.

Using humor can be an important way of coping. It can also be another approach to support and encourage the person with cancer. This can be a great way to relieve stress and take a break from the cancer condition. Let the person with cancer take the lead in using humor; it's healthy if they find something funny to express, and you can certainly join them in a good laugh..;

If they look good, let them know! Avoid making comments when their appearance isn't as good, such as "You're looking pale," or "You've lost weight." It's very likely that they're very aware of it, and they may feel embarrassed if people comment on it.

It's usually best not to share stories about family members or friends who have had cancer. Everyone is different, and these stories may not be helpful. Instead, it's OK to let them know that you are familiar with cancer because you've been through it with someone else. Then they can pick up the conversation from there.

Respect the privacy of someone who has cancer

If someone tells you that they have cancer, you should never tell anyone else unless they have given you permission. Let them be the one to tell others. If someone else asks you about it, you can say something like, "It's not up to me to share this, but I'm sure (____) will appreciate your concern. I'll let them know you asked about them."

It might feel awkward if you hear through the grapevine that someone has cancer. You could ask the person who told you if it's public information. If it's not, you probably shouldn't say anything to the person with cancer. But if it is public information, don't ignore it. You might say, in a caring way, "I heard what's happening, and I'm sorry."

You may feel angry or hurt if someone who's close to you didn't share the news of a cancer diagnosis with you right away. No matter how close you are, it may take time for the person to adjust to the diagnosis and be ready to tell others. Don't take it personally. Focus on how you can support that person now that you know. For suggestions on how to do this, see [Being a Friend To Someone With Cancer](#)².

What if the person's cancer comes back?

In some cases, a person's cancer may come back ([recur or recurrence](#))⁶ and the same or new treatment might be needed.. The person with cancer may or may not react the same way they did the first time. Again, communication is important. Most people are quite upset if they learn their cancer is back. They may feel they don't have the emotional or physical strength to get through it again or they might feel they have the power to be as strong as possible. By preparing yourself with the knowledge of how best to talk to the person with cancer, you can be most helpful to them.

What if the person refuses or stops cancer treatment?

At some point during a person's cancer journey, they might refuse or decide to stop cancer treatment. You might feel like they're giving up, and that can be upsetting or frustrating. You might not agree with their decision, but it is important to support them and give them the space to decide what they feel is best for their health, well-being, and quality of life.

Even after a person refuses cancer treatment or decides to stop their treatment, it's important to make sure they fully understand their options. You might want to suggest the person to talk with their cancer care team about their decision. Continue to offer your support.

Offer to help them reach out to their health care team for any questions or needs they might have. Your presence and support are very important during this time.

[For connecting and sharing during a cancer journey](#)

Anyone with cancer, their caregivers, families, and friends, can benefit from help and support. The American Cancer Society offers the Cancer Survivors Network (CSN), a safe place to connect with others who share similar interests and experiences. We also partner with CaringBridge, a free online tool that helps people dealing with illnesses like cancer stay in touch with their friends, family members, and support network by creating their own personal page where they share their journey and health updates.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/emotional-mood-changes/depression.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/how-to-be-a-friend-to-someone-with-cancer.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/coping.html
4. www.cancer.org/support-programs-and-services/road-to-recovery.html
5. www.cancer.org/support-programs-and-services.html
6. www.cancer.org/cancer/survivorship/long-term-health-concerns/recurrence.html
7. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/palliative-care.html
8. www.cancer.org/cancer/end-of-life-care/hospice-care.html
9. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/making-treatment-decisions/if-cancer-treatments-stop-working.html

References

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Costa-Requena G, Ballester Arnal R, Gil F. The influence of coping response and health-related quality of life on perceived social support during cancer treatment. *Palliat Support Care*. 2014;28:1-7.

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