

Introduction

When a family member or friend has been diagnosed with cancer you may wonder how you will support them. You maybe worried or anxious about what to say or not to say. You might be afraid of upsetting them by saying the wrong thing. You are not alone! Being open and sensitive about this goes along way in getting things right. Every person who is diagnosed with a cancer has a very individual experience, so do not assume how they might be feeling. Their mood can alter frequently anywhere from being happy to sad. They may not want to talk about the cancer or they may want your ear to listen. The most important position that you can take is for them to know that they can talk about it should they choose to and that you are there to listen and provide support if and when is needed. Asking the person what they want is a great starting position.

How to talk to a friend or family member with cancer

Cancer Research UK spoke directly to patients to get their input on the subject. Patients' top tips were as follows:

This must be a tough time for you
I can't imagine how you feel
I don't know what to say
I'm here if you want to talk
I know staying positive can be challenging, how are you really?
Do you want a lift to you appointment?
I can talk about me if you like?
I can drop some dinner over to you tonight
I'm sorry you're going through this
I saw a good film the other day, you might like to watch it

What not to say

Try to avoid telling other "cancer stories". For example, "my friend also has cervical cancer and she is doing just fine". You can let the person know that you know someone else with a similar diagnosis but be led by them if they want to hear more. It can dilute their experience and minimise how they are feeling.

Avoid going into "you will be fine...nothing to worry about". Again, this can shut down emotional conversations that the individual may wish to talk about.

Avoid war language such as "this is a battle.... you are so strong.... you will beat it...you're going to win this cancer fight"

Do not offer advice when they have not asked for it

Make the situation about you, talking about how upset you are about their diagnosis

Supporting friend and family members emotionally

Those impacted by a cancer diagnosis often has an emotional response to the news. This can occur at every stage of the disease trajectory (from initial diagnosis, through treatment and beyond).

Depending on your relationship with the person you too can have a similar emotional response.

Some of the emotional responses that you and they might feel are but not limited to:

Sadness

Disappointment

Fear

Loneliness

Isolation
Uncertainty
Resentment
Jealous
Frustration

Being aware of these responses can allow you to support that person in a way that is meaningful to them. You too can experience similar emotions when someone close gets a cancer diagnosis. It is important to keep a check on this and seek help if you are finding it difficult coping. If you are not coping as you normally would then it is very difficult to support someone else at the same time. There are lots of cancer supports centres around the country which offer counselling support. Please see the service directory in your area for the nearest support centre to you.

Supporting your friend or family member is rewarding, for them and for you. There are many ways that you can support them. If they do not wish to talk maybe do something practical like prepare meals, help with childcare or bring them to an appointment or example. Remembering that often cancer treatment is lengthy, and support can tend to drop off as the new norm becomes to normal, so ensure your family member or friend that you are in this for the long haul.

Emotional support

Research has shown that emotional support from family and friends can make a big difference to the quality of life of someone with cancer.

People are often afraid of saying the wrong thing to someone with cancer. If you are open, honest and show your concern then you can be a great support. Here are some tips that might help you.

Do:

- Say if you feel awkward – it acknowledges the situation rather than pretending it's not happening.
- Give them a friendly hand squeeze or hug – it can go a long way.
- Ring them up, send a card, note or text to say you're thinking of them.
- Let them know that if they want to talk you'll be there to listen - then make sure you are available.
- Respect their need for privacy.
- Offer support throughout the whole diagnosis - at the beginning, during and after treatment.
- Share a joke or laugh with them if this seems appropriate.
- Keep your relationship as normal and as balanced as possible.

Try not to:

- Say you know how they feel – we can't ever know exactly how someone with cancer feels.
- Tell them to 'be strong' or 'be positive' – it puts pressure on them to behave a certain way.
- Take things personally if they seem angry or upset or don't want to talk.
- Offer advice that they haven't asked for.
- Compare their situation to somebody else you know, each person's experience with cancer is unique.

Being a good listener

A good listener tries to be aware of someone's thoughts and feelings as much as they can. You don't need to have all the answers. Just listening to a person's concerns or worries can be hugely helpful.

A good listener tries to really tune in and listen to a person in the moment. Listening is an important part of providing emotional support.

Here are some tips on how to listen well.

- Try to keep the setting private, relaxed and with few distractions.
- Maintain eye contact but don't stare.
- Let the person with cancer lead the conversation and try not to interrupt.
- Give your full attention to what they are saying.
- If you're finding it difficult or upsetting don't change the subject – say how you feel, this can prevent any awkwardness.
- If they cry, don't try to cheer them up. Reassure them that it's OK to be sad and that it's a normal response to what's happening to them.
- A friendly touch of the hand can help but if they pull away give them space.
- Try not to give advice unless they have asked for it.
- Don't use humour unless they have used it themselves.
- Silences are OK, don't feel like you have to fill them with words.

This [video](#) has top tips from people affected by cancer on how to listen to someone with cancer. It is 54 seconds long.

How to listen to someone with cancer - Top tips from patients

- Make eye contact but don't stare.
- Let me lead the conversation.
- Give me your full attention.
- Find us somewhere private to talk.
- It's ok for one, or both of us, to be upset.
- I'll ask if I want advice.
- Silences are ok, you don't have to fill them.
- Try not to interrupt even if I seem upset.
- I might not want to talk, please don't take it personally.
- Tell me it's normal to be sad.

Practical support

As well as supporting someone emotionally it can help to offer practical support too.

Check in with your friend or loved one and ask if there is anything specific that they need help with.

Some people don't want help, or they may find it hard to accept it. They might want to remain as independent as possible. Try not to take this personally. Respect their decision but let them know that if they change their mind, you are there.

You could offer to help again in the future or set up a rota so that you and friends can take it in turns to help out. Make sure that you are able to commit to any offers of help that you do make.

Here are some practical ideas:

- make some meals that they can put in the freezer
- offer to do some gardening
- drive them to the hospital for blood tests and appointments
- help with the cleaning or laundry

- take any pets for a walk or to the vet
- offer to do the shopping
- return or pick up library books
- offer to take the children to and from school
- bring them lunch and stay for a chat
- run any errands that they might need doing
- ask before you visit, in case they are feeling too unwell