

When someone you know has cancer

'I have cancer' are words that nobody wants to hear from a loved one.

Even in the closest relationships, it can leave family and friends feeling awkward, uncomfortable and uncertain of the right things to say. Do not feel ashamed of your own fears and discomfort. This is very normal. However, sometimes if these feelings are not addressed, they can create cracks in a relationship. You can turn the whole situation around by simply offering your support.

We say; 'staying in touch is always better than staying away'. Whatever you do, don't distance yourself or keep quiet. Allow these steps of communication to be guided by the person with the cancer. Be honest with the person about how you feel. You might be surprised and find it is more easier to talk about than what you imagined. Ask the questions: When would they like to talk? Meet in-person, chat on the phone or via Whatsapp? How much would they like to share?

Actions mean louder than words. There are many ways you can show you support by simply offering up your time such as helping your loved one with chores, or treating them to a drive on a beautiful day.

Do:

- ▶ Communication is key.
- ▶ Listen. Be an active listener and give your full attention without being distracted or feeling like you need to offer solutions to everything. Try to put yourself in their shoes with compassion and understanding.
- ▶ Work at making things as normal as possible. Try not to make everything about cancer. Bring up different topics, not in an effort to distract but rather with the hope of bringing about some balance.
- ▶ Be conscious of how many questions you are asking, especially in the early days of a diagnosis. Just remember that the person with cancer is having to repeat themselves to all their loved ones and it is emotionally exhausting.
- ▶ Find out where they stand about receiving advice. Sometimes there can be a bombardment of well-meaning health tips and suggestions. Perhaps the person with cancer is wanting help to research therapies and remedies. Find out what their limits are as it can get too overwhelming with information overload.
- ▶ Be as supportive as you can in every way even if you disagree with decisions been made about medical care.
- ▶ Someone with cancer might feel guilty that they are responsible for the causes of their illness. Help them know that they can't change their future but they can take charge of their life and their health during their treatment and beyond into their survivorship.
- ▶ Use humour to lighten the load but be conscious if your loved one is the type of person to appreciate this or not
- ▶ Respect their privacy. If someone shares their diagnosis with you, it is done with trust and vulnerability. Get their consent if you are allowed to share their news with others.
- ▶ If you have heard of someone's diagnosis from another person, ask them if it is public knowledge before approaching the cancer patient.
- ▶ If the person with cancer has been very public about their diagnosis, don't ignore it. Check in with them that you have seen/heard their news.

Don't:

- ▶ Do not impose your own beliefs and choices onto them. Suggestions are welcome, but there is a thin line.
- ▶ A cancer patient can experience a wide range of emotions from grief and rage, to depression and anxiety. Never judge them or make light of how they feel.
- ▶ Do not avoid your loved one out of your own feelings of vulnerability or fear. Express how you feel honestly however do not make this all about you.
- ▶ Don't show false optimism or tell them to stay positive
- ▶ Do not assume that if the person with cancer is positive or hopeful that they are in denial. This might be the best way that they have chosen to handle the situation but it doesn't mean that they are not scared.

**Find something to believe in
Many turn to faith and spiritual support to
provide light during challenging times.
Prayer and meditation can provide solace
and a sense of calm and connection.**



“If I had a magic wand to change cancer treatment, I would make it so everybody had the opportunity to get mental-health support and proactively bring it to them, rather than waiting until somebody is falling apart at the seams”

Dr. Carla Kakutani

Choose your words carefully:

Do say:

- ▶ "I am not sure what to say, but I want you to know that I care and I am here for you"
- ▶ "Do you feel comfortable sharing what you are going through?"
- ▶ "I will follow your lead when you are ready to talk about your journey"
- ▶ "I love you!"
- ▶ "Let me help you with...."
- ▶ "I hear that you need space. I want to be here for you. I'll stay close so that you can find me when you are ready."
- ▶ "It is ok to be sad"
- ▶ "This is really hard for you"
- ▶ "I am sorry to hear that you are going through this"
- ▶ "I will keep you in my thoughts"
- ▶ "If you would like to talk, I am here"
- ▶ "How are you doing?"
- ▶ "What are you thinking of doing, and how can I help?"

Do not say:

- ▶ "I know how you feel"
- ▶ "I know someone who went through this"
- ▶ "Don't worry"
- ▶ "I am sure you will be fine"
- ▶ "I know just what you should do"
- ▶ "How long do you have?"
- ▶ "This is God's plan"
- ▶ "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger"
- ▶ "Everything happens for a reason"

