



Supporting Your Loved One Following a Cancer Diagnosis

Your loved one's blood cancer experience begins at diagnosis but doesn't end once treatment is over. For many cancer survivors and caregivers, life will not be the same as it was before. Cancer survivors and their families will face uncertainty, including challenges and questions about the future many years after a diagnosis. These challenges can be physical, such as fatigue or difficulty sleeping; cognitive or mental, such as forgetfulness; or, emotional, such as depression, anxiety, and fears about cancer coming back.

As a family member or friend who wants to help, it can be hard to know what to say or do. Remember that even when your loved one has finished cancer treatment, they will continue to need your support. Continue to be present. Ask about their cancer experience, and explore what you can do to help. Remind them that you care.

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How Can You Help?

Family and friends don't always know what to say or how to act once a person has been diagnosed with cancer. Here are some ideas that other cancer survivors said were helpful for them:

- Keep in contact; don't avoid contact because you don't know what to say. It can be painful and isolating when people stay away. If you don't know what to say, it's okay to acknowledge this. For example, *"I don't know what to say, but I want you to know that I'm thinking about you."*
- Reach out like you would normally. Ask what you can do to help. Sometimes, concrete suggestions can be helpful. Offer practical assistance, such as grocery shopping, driving to appointments, or helping with children. Also ask if there is something in particular that would be helpful. For example, *"I am not sure what might be helpful and was hoping you could please let me know what I can do to help."* Also know that sometimes, simply being present and sitting with your loved one, reducing the isolation might also be helpful.
- You may want to update them on your life – they might not want to just talk about their cancer experience. Keep them feeling included in your life. It's the little things that can mean the most.
- Acknowledge the caregiver. Call and check in with them too. Ask what you can do to help. They can best support their loved one when they are feeling supported. Caregivers often feel isolated and overwhelmed.

Other Tips:

Don't offer to "cheer someone up" or suggest they "stay positive". Don't insist that "everything will be all right." Your loved one may not feel that way. A diagnosis of cancer brings a lot of thoughts and experiences that are not at all positive. Saying these types of things may make your loved one feel as though they cannot share the range of their true feelings. Instead, sit with them when they are feeling sad. Most people try to dismiss or avoid this. Knowing you also feel sad or afraid may help your loved one be open and honest about their feelings. Share some of your own thoughts and feelings.

Remember each cancer experience is unique. Do not to compare your loved one's experience with someone else you know, even if it's the exact same diagnosis, treatment or the person is doing well. Each person, treatment protocol, side effects and genetics vary – no two experiences are identical. Many survivors already feel scared or worried about their diagnosis and what will happen during and after treatment. Comparing them to someone else can be very harmful, and does not validate their individual experience. It can be particularly harmful if you mention another person that died or has had serious complications during treatment – this may only create fear and anxiety in your loved one.

Do not offer medical advice. There is a lot of general information online. Only your loved one's physician can help them determine if a piece of advice relates to their specific experience. Also some people want to explore additional information while others find it overwhelming or harmful. Ask your loved one if they have additional questions or concerns and address those



together with their blood cancer specialist and discuss the recommendations. It is important that your loved one feels they are doing what's best for their journey.

Don't try to find the positive for them.

Allow them to discover something positive about their own cancer experience. It is natural for many of us to try to “fix” problems and focus on the positive of every situation, but each survivor or caregiver will find their own silver lining in their own time. Suggesting positives for them can be hurtful for many different reasons. Instead ask them, “*Is there something you are grateful for?*” or “*Is there something you have learned about yourself from your experience?*” “*What is something that is meaningful for you?*” Allow your loved one to guide these conversations.

Offer Specific Ways to Help.

“Sometimes people would say ‘call me if you need anything,’ but a lot of the time, as people living through cancer, we can’t do that because we don’t know what we need. It was much more helpful for me when people would find specific things they could do.”

– Mayra, blood cancer survivor

Be yourself. Think about ways you can help or how you can support them. Tell your friend or family member you would like to help. Then offer specific suggestions. You may want to say:

- *“I’d like to make some meals. Would that be all right? What are some family favorites?”*
- *“I am running errands tomorrow. Can I add some of yours to my list?”*
- *“Can I drive you to any doctor appointments or come with you to an appointment? I know it can be hard to go alone.”*
- *“I’m going to the store this afternoon. How about I call you back in an hour and you give me a list of things I can pick up for you?”*
- *“If you’d like to rest tomorrow, why don’t I take the kids to a movie and out for pizza?”*
- *“Why don’t your kids carpool with mine this week? That will give you some extra time to rest.”*
- *“There was a sale on laundry detergent at the store. I got some extra for you. Why don’t I do some laundry for you?”*
- *“It’s going to be a beautiful day today. How about I pack some sandwiches and we go to the park for a little while?”*

Ways to help from a distance. It can be difficult to find ways to help when your loved one is not geographically close to you. However, there are still ways that you can offer support. Ideas include:

- Order dinner to be delivered or send a gift card for a takeout restaurant so that your loved one can have food ready if they have a particularly hard or tiring day.
- Set up an online grocery order for them and walk them through how to use it. That way they can avoid shopping and just pick up their groceries in the parking lot or have them delivered. As cost may be a concern for many families, a gift card to the grocery store can also assist with this option.
- Call your loved one regularly. For example, set up phone dates once per week at a set time. Connect over Skype or FaceTime. Remember they may not be feeling well due to treatment so it is also important to remain flexible.
- Practice active listening when speaking with your loved one. Don't make the call about you and don't allow yourself to be distracted during the call. Focus on what your loved one is saying. You can ask, "*Would you like to talk?*" and if they begin to share you can say "*Can you tell me more?*" Remember most people don't ask. Giving them space to share – the good and the bad – is important.

- Text your loved one to let them know you are thinking about them. Also let them know that there is no pressure to text back. You simply want to let them know you are thinking about them.
- Send funny messages, videos, or photos that you know will make them laugh.
- Make a list of movie suggestions for your loved one; include comedies. Avoid recommending movies with themes of cancer or death.

Remember that your loved one may not always be able to respond to messages. Their energy levels vary greatly day to day. Unless they say otherwise, your messages are still appreciated. Even if they don't respond, continue to send messages of love and support.

It is also important to remember that your loved one may not always be able to accept your support. That is okay too. Knowing that someone wants to help means a lot and will go far in helping them feel less alone. After a cancer diagnosis, it is common for your loved one to feel like they have lost some control in their life, remember that decision-making is an important example of regaining a sense of control.

Acknowledgement

This material was reviewed by: Elizabeth Dougherty, MSW, RSW, Palliative Care Psychosocial Clinician and Educator, C. Elizabeth Dougherty Consulting.



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1 833 222-4884 • info@bloodcancers.ca • bloodcancers.ca