

## **Five Tips: when someone you know has cancer**

Despite medical victories, millions of survivors and a sharp decline in mortality rates, the C word still causes one of the most visceral fears in the human community. We all breathe easier after a negative scan or exam.

We all know someone battling or who had cancer. When we are close to the person, how best to help is not in question. But what about a friend, co-worker or distant relative we don't know so well? When the news is shared, how to react, how engaged to become, or what to do? The generic statement: "call me if you need help" makes us feel better, but how likely is the person to do so?

Without much information, we could assume difficult treatments are in the near future. So might emotional turmoil, financial worries and a reassessment of priorities. I propose five tips to guide you when you care enough about a cancer patient, but don't know enough.

### 1. Offer concrete, specific help

Based on your skills, aptitudes, experience or habits, you might propose your services in one or a few specific areas. Detail what your assistance would consist of, and how extensive it would be. A good example would be to say: "I will do your grocery shopping every week on Saturday mornings for the next month but could not make runs during the week".

Other examples of useful services are medical billing support (go through the bills, verify what is owed), running errands, bringing complete meals, paying a cleaning lady, taking over carpool duties, or having your teenage daughter babysit or help with homework.

### 2. Be silent

Because there are many aspects of your friend's journey you don't know about, avoid giving well meaning but possibly unhelpful (or even offensive) advice unless prompted.

Your uncle Joe's cancer experience or the article on alternative treatments you just read, are only relevant if your friend asks for them. Do assist with research if needed, but refrain from expressing your opposition or disagreement at a decision. This is not your life or health, and if you were to do things differently in the same situation does not make you right.

### 3. Offer true friendship

Friendship has many meanings, but one I find very appropriate is that of non-judgmental listener and supporter. Allow a dialogue to go where it is needed, not where your agenda leads it to. Be aware of the mood and of the best response, as they will change. Some times will call for humor and laughter, others for reflection or inspirational words.

Be there, only if as a strong shoulder for your friend to cry on. Or be the leader she requires today to take her mind off things.

### 4. Offer neutral gifts

If your involvement revolves turns general gift giving rather than time, remember that changes in sensory sensibility are common. Pass on flowers with a strong fragrance, on scented candles or perfumed body or bath items as they will likely be discarded or go unused. Going scent-free is the best way, or give a store credit instead.

Selected self-help or cancer-related books may not be welcome, but a gift certificate to a major or online bookstore probably will.

Consider giving a gift of "escape": movie or concert tickets, a few hours at a botanical garden or beach, a visit to a museum, a drive to a favorite place or store.

## 5. Be kind and understanding

Even the most responsible, emotionally stable person experiences changes during such difficult times. Remember that emotional mood swings, memory lapses, mental "flakiness" and changes in commitment or plans might occur. Do not take outburst or late-minute cancellations personally. When body and mind undergo such an out of control roller coaster, there might not be any better alternative than just wait for it to pass.

### In conclusion

Forgiveness and understanding, along with patience and kindness, are valuable gifts.

Often, small gestures are as appreciated as large-scale ones, coming from the heart and not from a sense of obligation. Extending help involving a personal connection or time donation because one wants to, not because one has to, conveys respect and truthfulness.

Keeping this in mind may direct you to a less personal (but appreciated nonetheless) gesture such as a gift certificate. While not everyone is able or willing to offer direct support, at least resentment or misunderstanding will not be added to an already difficult situation.

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