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Being a Friend to Someone with Cancer

Today, most people with cancer are treated as outpatients, meaning they don't have to stay in the hospital. But they still often need help, support, and encouragement.

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Friendship and cancer

Studies have found that cancer survivors with strong emotional support tend to adjust better to the changes cancer brings, have a more positive outlook, and often report a better quality of life. Research has shown that people with cancer need support from friends. You can make a big difference in the life of someone with cancer.

Friends of people with cancer often want to help, but don't know what to do.

As you spend time with your friend and learn more about how cancer is affecting their everyday life, keep your eyes open for other things you can offer to help with. Here are some ideas about where to start.

What you can do: Notes and calls

Don't be afraid to touch, hug, or shake hands with your friend.

What you can do: Conversation

Many people worry that they don't know what to say to someone with cancer. Try to remember that the most important thing is not what you say – it's that you're there and willing to listen. Try to hear and understand how your friend feels. Let them know that you're open to talking whenever they feel like it. Or, if the person doesn't feel like talking, let them know that's OK, too.

- Listen without always feeling that you have to respond. Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs most.
- Gear the conversation to your friend's attention span so they don't feel overwhelmed or guilty about not being able to talk.
- Help your friend focus on whatever brings out good feelings, such as sports, religion, travel, or pets.
- Help your friend keep active in the friendship by asking advice, opinions, and questions – even if you don't get the response you expect.
- Ask your friend if they're in any discomfort. Suggest new ways to be more comfortable, such as using more pillows or moving the furniture.
- Give honest compliments, such as "You look rested today."
- Support your friend's feelings. Let them be negative, withdrawn, or silent. Resist the urge to change the subject.
- Don't urge your friend to "fight" the disease.
- Don't tell them how strong they are; they may feel the need to act strong even when they're sad or exhausted.
- Be sure to include your friend when talking to others in the room.
- Assume that your friend can hear you even if they seem to be asleep or dazed. Don't offer medical advice or your opinions on things like diet, vitamins, and herbal

Some people find it hard to accept support – even when they need it. Don't be surprised or hurt if your friend refuses help. It's not you. It may be more their need for independence.

- Provide emotional support through your presence and your touch.
- Help the caregiver. In doing so, you'll help your friend. Many people are afraid of being a burden to their loved ones.
- Offer practical ideas on what you can do to help, and then follow through.
- If your friend needs medical equipment or money for treatment, you can look into getting something donated or organizing ways to help raise money,

Assume your help is needed, even if there are others also helping out.

What you can do: Gifts

Look for small, practical things your friend may need or just enjoy. Think about what their average day is like and what might make it a little better. It's always good to laugh and smile, too, so look for fun things for your friend.

- Make sure gifts can be used now. Small gifts given frequently are usually better than large, one-time gifts.
- Insist that a thank-you note is not needed.

Suggested ideas:

- Soft or silly socks
- Fun hats or scarves
- Bright, soft washcloths, towels, or sheets
- Silk or satin pillowcases
- Pajamas or a robe
- Unusual toiletries, such as soap and lotion
- Stamped postcards
- Favorite or unusual foods or snacks
- Self-care items, such as a cancer resource book, a special pillow, or a heating pad
- A massage device

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.

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Written by

The American Cancer Society medical and editorial content team
(<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/acs-medical-content-and-news-staff.html>)

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