



What to Say to a Cancer Patient

Introduction

When facing a cancer diagnosis, a patient's life can suddenly be flipped upside down. During this journey, many patients begin to lean on friends and family for needed support and a sense of normalcy.

We often hear stories of cancer patients who feel alone because their relationships with their loved ones have changed since being diagnosed. On the other hand, we also hear of those same friends and family members who shy away because they are afraid to say the wrong thing or not help in the right way.

The truth is, there is no rulebook for how to speak to a cancer patient who is going through one of the toughest seasons in their life. This eBook includes suggestions that we hope will encourage healthy conversations between cancer patients and the people that care for them most.





Keep In Mind

EMPATHY

You may not know what the patient is experiencing or how they feel, but strive to have empathy. Try to understand, be aware of, and be sensitive to what the patient shares. Only use supportive words and keep the focus on the patient. Follow through with what you say you're going to do and help however you can.

COMPASSION

Imagine if you were in the patient's shoes. How would you want to be treated? What would bother you? What would brighten your day? Be kind, caring, hospitable, generous, and lead with your heart.

THEY'RE STILL HUMAN

The patient is still your friend, family, neighbor, or co-worker. Their world might be turned upside down, but they're still the same person. They know you and will know if you're uncomfortable or uneasy. Try to act as normal as possible, while remaining sensitive to their situation.

Golden Rule: Think before you speak.

Ask yourself, "Would I want someone to say this to me?"



Dos and Don'ts

DON'T assume they want to share their cancer journey or keep it private.

DO follow their lead.

Some people are private and others are very public with their journey. Let them set the tone about what they want to talk about and when. It doesn't always have to be about cancer. Chances are they want to feel as normal as possible.

Tell them something funny that happened to you, gossip about the latest reality TV show, or talk about your weekend plans. When they want to talk about cancer, let them. Sometimes just being there to listen is the best thing you can do.

If they are open about their journey and you want to check in, try saying, "How are you feeling today?" or "I know you had an appointment yesterday. How did it go?"

DON'T ask about their prognosis.

DO say "I'm here for you no matter what happens."

Avoid questions like "What stage are you?" or "How serious is it?" Although these questions come from a place of caring, they can come across insensitive or invasive. If the patient volunteers that information, then it is okay to talk about. Otherwise, it's best not to ask.

Some people disappear or feel uncomfortable when someone they know gets a cancer diagnosis because they don't know what to do or say. One of the worst things you can do is avoid the person. Cancer patients can feel isolated at times because of everything new and radical they are going through. It can be hard to know the "right" thing to say, but just letting the person know that you care and are there for them is enough.

If the patient wants to talk about their prognosis, try asking questions that come from a place of educating yourself instead of judging or assuming. For example, say "What does Stage 3 cancer mean?" instead of "Stage 3 sounds bad."

Also, don't forget about the patient after the first few weeks or months. Cancer is "a long tour of duty" as Lillie Shockney, a world-renowned nurse navigator, says. Patients and survivors need support after the initial shock of the diagnosis wears off. Even after treatment ends, there can still be unpleasant side effects and new emotions to process. Show you care by being there throughout the journey.

DON'T say "At least you get a lot of time off work."

DO offer to start a meal train or GoFundMe page.

While you might think silver lining statements like, "At least you get time off work" are playful and helpful, they can be misunderstood. Think about it this way, a patient would much rather go to work than face cancer.

Offering to help is a great way to support a cancer patient, but be specific! Ask them what their family likes to eat and if they have any dietary restrictions. Offer to bring dinner on a specific day, maybe after treatment or the day after. Take the initiative to start a meal train where friends, family, and co-workers can sign up to bring dinner to the patient. ⁽¹⁾

Crowd funding can also be a great and practical way to help patients pay for medical expenses. Before starting a funding page, be sure to ask the patient or their family. Some people may want to keep this area of their life private. ⁽²⁾

DON'T comment on their appearance.

DO say "I'm so happy to see you today!"

Comments like, "Your wig looks great!" or "You have a perfectly round head." or "You've lost weight!" may seem nice, but they are all due to side effects from cancer treatment. Pointing these out, even with good intentions, can cause the patient to be reminded of these hard side effects and become insecure.

Instead, try sharing compliments like "I'm so happy to see you today!" or "You just brightened my day!" A small compliment delivered with meaning and a pure heart can lift anyone's spirits!

If you want to comment on someone's appearance, go for broad compliments about the person as a whole like "You are beautiful!" or "It's so great to see you smile!"

DON'T put pressure on them.

DO cut them slack.

When facing cancer, there is a lot going on: appointments, scans, medications, side effects, and a rollercoaster of emotions. If the patient doesn't text back, or ignores your calls for a bit, don't be offended. This "new normal" can be overwhelming for the patient at first, but keep trying to reach out. Most likely they are reading your texts and listening to your voicemails and appreciating them. The golden rule here is to cut the patient lots of slack and don't set expectations during this trying time.

DON'T say "My aunt had breast cancer and died a few years ago."

DO say "I'm so sorry you're going through this."

Avoid telling stories with unhappy endings. You always want to provide the patient with hope, not fear. If you want to relate to the patient through someone you know, ask if they would like to be connected to that survivor. Having a strong support system, including people who've been on the same journey, is tremendously helpful.

If you're ever in a situation where you don't know what to say, a simple "I'm sorry that you're going through this" works. This makes the patient feel that they are being heard and understood.

DON'T say "Let me know how I can help."

DO say "What day can I bring you dinner?"

If you say, "Let me know how I can help" you mean well, but you are placing the burden on the patient to think of something helpful and then bring it up. Most likely they won't tell you how you can help. You have to be specific and proactive here.

Let them know what day you can come over to help. Offer to help with tasks such as yardwork, laundry, childcare or running errands. Planting fresh flowers, folding the stack of clean clothes, taking the kids out for an ice cream date, or picking up groceries for the week can all be helpful things the patient never thought they needed help with.

Most importantly, don't bail on your commitment to help and do it more than once if you can. They are counting on you.

DON'T say "Are you going to have children after this?"

DO show them you care.

While getting pregnant is possible for some patients after cancer, for others, having children after cancer is impossible. Some women are placed on hormone therapy for 5-10 years after diagnosis or they have to have hysterectomies as a part of their treatment plan. In addition, they could have a higher risk of their cancer returning if they get off medication in order to have children. Bringing up this topic without the patient's permission can be intrusive, so let the patient guide this fragile topic.

Something that's always appropriate is showing the patient that you care. Give them a hug or high-five, surprise them with something they like (books, magazines, a gift card, or their favorite treat), go out to eat, or leave them a kind note. These small gestures can really make a difference!

DON'T try to “fix” things.

DO be realistic & listen.

It's our natural instinct to go into “fix it” mode when something seems wrong. It's not easy to sit in someone's pain with them, but that may be what the patient needs most.

Try to avoid saying things like, “You'll be okay” or “You're only given what you can handle” or “Just keep a positive attitude”. Saying those things might make you feel better, but they may not have the same impact on the patient. The uncertainty of potentially not being okay is scary and uncomfortable. The patient doesn't need to be reminded of that with upbeat, blanket statements. Instead, be open to the patient's feelings. The most important thing is to just listen, even if you don't know what to say.

DON'T judge the patient's lifestyle choices or assume they are to blame for the disease.

DO say “Are you up for doing something fun?”

Blame is not helpful. There are many factors that can cause cancer, but sometimes you can do everything right and still be diagnosed with cancer.

Most patients just want to be treated like they're normal. Invite them to do something fun, like going out to lunch or watching a movie. Or let them choose what to do! Whatever you do, try not to judge the patient for anything pre or post-diagnosis. Facing cancer is challenging enough. Be a cheerleader for the patient!

DON'T offer information about holistic treatment options.

DO offer to be a “chemo buddy”.

Avoid offering information about unproven treatments. Sharing articles from reputable sources can be helpful, but be sure those are welcome from the patient. They may be overwhelmed with information already.⁽³⁾

Trust that the team of doctors knows the best treatment for the patient. If you sense that the patient is uncomfortable with their doctor or treatment plan, always recommend seeking out a second opinion. Being in control of your health and care is vital.

If you want to help in a hands-on way, offer to drive them to chemo or doctor appointments. During chemo, they may even want you to stay. Having a “chemo buddy” that spends time with the patients during long treatments can help make the experience better. It also allows you to see a real glimpse into what they’re facing.

If you’re a co-worker to the patient, see if your supervisor will approve you attending chemo with the patient for support. Although it can be time consuming, moral support from your team is invaluable. Plus, most oncology offices have Wi-Fi allowing employees to continue working remotely if there is downtime while the patient is napping or needing quiet time.

DON'T talk about your bad day.

DO keep it all about them.

Don't burden the patient with your problems. Focus on the person with cancer: Do they want to talk about their bad day? Do they need to hear a good joke? Do they need someone to sit in silence with them for a minute? Try to avoid putting the patient in a position where they have to comfort you. Be the type of friend you would want if the roles were reversed.

There are some times when the patient may want to be distracted from their problems. Feel free to share your thoughts in this situation, but try not to go too deep.

DON'T make comments regarding “free” plastic surgery.

DO offer to start a fundraiser in their honor.

Remember, any plastic surgery the patient chooses to pursue is a result of the cancer they had to face. Also, if a patient chooses to have reconstructive surgery, allow them to decide if they want to share that experience. You are there to be supportive, regardless of their decisions.

A great way to show your support is to offer to start a fundraiser in their honor and donate funds to a charity of their choice. This is your chance to celebrate the patient and make them feel loved and supported. ⁽⁴⁾

Fundraising tips: Design a t-shirt to honor the patient and sell it to family and friends, host a bake sale, or donate \$10 to have a jeans day at work. Be creative and fun!

Be sure to ask the patient if they are comfortable with being the inspiration behind a fundraiser for a related charity. It may be that the patient is struggling financially and a direct fundraising campaign for the family would be hugely helpful. Providing two fundraising options gives the patient the power to choose how they want to be honored.

Appendix

- (1) Meal Train: [Mealtrain.com](https://www.mealtrain.com) is a great, free resource. Set up dates and preferred food types, then invite friends, family, and co-workers to sign up for a time to deliver a meal.
- (2) GoFundMe: [GoFundMe](https://www.gofundme.com) is a free fundraising tool that allows you to easily raise funds to help with personal expenses for the patient.
- (3) NBCF Resources: Check out the content on [NBCF.org](https://www.nbcf.org) if you want to learn more or share resources.
 - a. [About Breast Cancer](#)
 - b. [Resources](#)
 - c. [Our Programs](#)
 - d. [How You Can Help](#)
 - e. [Volunteer](#)
- (4) Fundraise for National Breast Cancer Foundation: If you're looking to start a fundraiser in honor of a breast cancer patient, our team is here to help! You can get started by:
 - a. [Checking out our Fundraising page](#)
 - b. [Creating a fundraiser through Facebook](#)
 - c. Or, [reaching out to our team for support](#)
- (5) [What to Do When Your Friend Has Breast Cancer](#): Heather Lagemann, a breast cancer survivor, wrote this article for [Healthline](https://www.healthline.com) to help others understand how to be a friend to someone facing cancer.