



Listen With Your Heart

Talking With the Person
Who Has Cancer



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How do you talk to someone who has cancer?

When talking with someone who has cancer, the most important thing is to just listen. Try to hear and understand how they feel. Don't make light, judge, or try to change the way the person feels or acts. Try to put your own feelings and fears aside. Let them know that you're open to talking whenever they feel like it. Or, if they don't feel like talking right now, that's OK, too. You can offer to listen whenever they're ready.

Here we will share some ideas on how to be supportive and helpful when you talk with someone who has cancer. We refer to this person as your friend, but it may be a close loved one or a family member, too. You can learn how to show this person that you are someone they can truly count on. We call this kind of communication "listening with your heart."

About cancer

The word "cancer" itself is upsetting. It often makes people think about death. But death is not the outcome for many people with cancer. Millions of people who have had cancer are alive in the US today. And more and more cancers are being found early – when they're small and may be easier to treat. So the fear you might feel when you learn that someone you care about has cancer can and should be mixed with hope. Most cancers can be treated, and researchers are finding new and better ways to find and treat cancer every day.

Hearing the news

Waiting

When a lump or a symptom leads your friend to see a health care provider, there may be many days of waiting to have tests done or waiting for test results. During this time neither you nor your friend knows what they might be dealing with. All kinds of thoughts can go through your friend's mind and through yours.

Some people may sense that they have cancer before they hear it from a doctor. Each person responds to a cancer diagnosis in their own way. Some may want to talk about what the doctor said in detail. Others may not want to talk about it at all. Sometimes, the person's need to talk changes from day to day. Simply asking, "Would you like to talk about it?" is a direct and respectful way to find out what they need.



Most doctors make it a policy to be honest about the diagnosis, treatment options, and treatment outlook.

Finding out it's cancer

If cancer is found, the doctor should be the one who tells the patient. Is someone going to be with your friend for this visit? Do they want someone to go with them? Think about whether you should be there when the doctor gives the test results. Sometimes when the doctor talks with the patient and a family member or friend at the same time, it gives the patient a feeling of support. They know they're not facing cancer alone. But some people prefer to keep their talks with the doctor private. Ask your friend whether you should plan to go along for the test results.

If you go with the patient to get test results

People are often shocked when they first hear the word cancer. It may be hard for them to hear or remember anything else after that. Many people can take in only small amounts of upsetting information. If you're with the patient, try to pay close attention. You may even want to take notes. Later on, you may be needed to help remember and explain what was said.

When you talk about the visit later, if you sense that your friend with cancer is having trouble taking in the information you're sharing, take it slow.

If you are not comfortable talking about cancer, you may not be the best person for your friend to talk with at this time. You may need some time to work through your own feelings. You can even explain to your friend that you are having trouble talking

about cancer. Tell them that you would like to talk, but don't feel you are the best person right now. A social worker, counselor, or another friend or family member may be able to offer more support at this time. You can suggest that your friend seek support from them.

If you'd like to find out more about living with cancer and its treatment, we have another booklet called *After Diagnosis: A Guide for Patients and Families* that can help. You can get a copy by calling us, or you can read it on our website.

Communication

One of the key ways to help keep open lines of communication is not only to ask "How are you feeling?" but also "What are you feeling?" If you think about it, "How are you?" is one of the most common questions we ask, but it can be a rather thoughtless one. The expected response is "Fine" or "Good." It doesn't allow for much discussion. When you ask, "What are you feeling?" you're digging a little deeper. Asking this helps your friend feel like you want to know how they're really doing.

People with cancer sometimes like to get the opinions of those closest to them about their illness, treatment, and treatment outlook. Be open and honest, but don't try to answer questions that you don't know the answers to. Your friend will sense your honesty and appreciate it.



When you ask the question “What are you feeling?” be ready to hear anything.

Sources of support

Everyone, no matter how emotionally strong they are, can use support. Try to understand what your friend is going through – by listening, offering a hand, and giving encouragement along the way.

Encouraging and supporting someone does not mean you act like a cheerleader, or that you try to make them feel good when they’re feeling bad. It’s important to allow your friend to express anger, frustration, and sad feelings. You can encourage them by saying things like, “I’m sorry you’re feeling so bad. I can’t imagine how you feel, but I am here to listen anytime you need to talk.”

Or maybe, “You have one more round of chemo. Maybe when that’s over, you’ll start feeling a little better.”

In fact, just listening and not talking may be more helpful than saying the wrong thing.

Concern for the family and caregivers

Just as people with cancer should not spend all their time thinking about their illness, neither should family members and friends spend every spare minute thinking about or being with their loved one. Caregivers need relief and rest to stay emotionally and physically fit and be able to help the person with cancer.

If you’re the main caregiver, plan time for yourself. Ask friends or other family members for help. Tell them exactly what they can do to help. Many times they are just waiting to be asked. For more on this, please call us or go to our website to read *What You Need to Know as a Cancer Caregiver*.



Everyone, no matter how emotionally strong they are, can be helped by support.

If you're not the main caregiver, it helps to think about that person, too. Caregivers often focus most of their energy and time on the person with cancer and may not have time to take care of themselves. You may be able to offer help so that they can have a much-needed break.

Visiting

Some people may have a hard time visiting people with cancer, especially those who look and feel very sick. When someone is sick and looks very different, it can be shocking and upsetting. Sometimes just seeing a lot of medical equipment around someone you care about can be disturbing.

Remember that this is the same person you've always known. Try to relate to them in the same way you have in the past. The pleasure you give by visiting them will be appreciated. When words seem too little, a look or touch can say a lot. Our booklet called *How to Be a Friend to Someone With Cancer* gives you tips on things you can do to show you care.

Facing the final stage of life

Some people have cancer that no longer responds to treatment and must face the fact that they will soon die. This is scary for the person who is sick and for those around them. Your friend may be in pain, may be bedridden, may be able to walk only a few steps, or may be confused. It's hard to watch someone you care about go through this process of decline.



Talking about death and dying

Many people worry about what to say when a person talks about dying. But this is a common topic when facing cancer. Some people want to talk about the dying process; they want to know what to expect. Some want to make sure that their wishes are followed when it comes to death. For example, they want to be sure that machines are not used to keep them alive. Some want to know how they will die, and ask, “What will happen when I’m actually dying?” For answers to these questions and concerns, it helps to find experts in hospice care or care of the terminally ill. If you don’t know the answers to specific questions, you can say, “I don’t know, but we can call some people who can help us with those answers.” These professionals can guide you and your friend by helping figure out things like living wills and advance directives and explaining the things that might happen as death gets closer.

Hospice staff members are used to answering these questions, and they are skilled in doing it in a supportive, caring way. Hospice gives expert, compassionate care for people with advanced disease. If you'd like to read more about end-of-life issues or hospice care, please go to our website. We also have information on living wills, advanced cancer, and caring for the cancer patient at home.

Summing up: Talking to the person with cancer

- Let them take the lead. If they want to talk, be a good listener. Listen to what's said and how it's said.
- Try to be OK with silence. It may help your friend to focus their thoughts. Talking because you're nervous can be irritating. Sometimes silence is comforting and allows them to better express their thoughts and feelings.
- Try to maintain eye contact. This gives your friend a sense that you are really present and listening carefully.
- Touching, smiling, and warm looks can get past the barriers of the illness to the person you know and love.
- Try not to give advice. Giving good advice is hard when you are not in the person's shoes. It's safer to ask questions or listen.
- Do not say, "I know how you feel." Your friend may get angry because you really don't know how they feel.

- If you're feeling tearful, explain this to your friend. Be brief in your explanation. You may have to stay away until you can be there without your friend having to comfort you.
- People with cancer don't always want to think or talk about the disease. This makes them feel like their only identity is "cancer patient." Laughing and talking about other things are often welcome distractions.
- Try to do as many things together as possible. If you used to play cards, play cards now! If you used to go to the movies together, keep going to movies or watch movies together at home. Use your judgment about your friend's energy level. Ask them if they need to take rest breaks. Try not to take the effects of the illness too lightly, but don't be overprotective. Keep inviting and urging your friend to do things with you and others.
- Encourage other friends and loved ones to visit. Maybe they would be willing to do errands, cook meals, or care for the children. If they can't visit, ask them to write, email, or call.

Notes



When someone you know has cancer, it can be hard to know what to say or do. In this booklet, you'll find ideas on how to support the person with cancer and show them that you care.

For cancer information, day-to-day help, and emotional support, visit the American Cancer Society website at **www.cancer.org** or call us at **1-800-227-2345**. We're here when you need us.



cancer.org | 1.800.227.2345

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