



Canadian
Cancer
Society

Listen First

*And 9 other ways to support
someone with cancer*



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“

I don't know
what to say.

”

It's a common worry to have when a friend, neighbour or co-worker has cancer.

Here's the good news. Much of the time, you don't have to say anything to comfort that friend.

Besides, there's always plenty you can do.

This brochure offers a checklist of ideas to support you in supporting your friend. Keep it on hand and use the ideas here to say what your friend might need to hear.

When you're finished with it, pass it on to others who may find it useful.

✓ Just listen

Not sure what to say? That's OK!

Who says you have to talk to make a friend with cancer feel better? Sometimes your friend may not even want to talk. But that doesn't mean they don't want you there. As long as you contact them first to be sure they're up for a visit, don't worry about what to say.

It's normal to feel uncomfortable. Often it's enough just to sit quietly with your friend. Your company is what matters most.

Remember friends you had as a child? Sometimes you'd be together without saying much for hours. Be that friend. When neither of you feels like talking, you can still be supportive by doing things together. Take an easy walk, watch a movie, listen to music – do whatever it is that first brought you together. It will mean a lot to both of you.

But what if your friend really does want to talk?

Be ready to listen. If you don't know what to say, just let them lead. There's no need to offer advice or opinions unless you're asked. So take the pressure off yourself. Just be there for your friend.

✓ **Stop worrying you'll say the wrong thing**

Speak from the heart

(it's simple, if not always easy)

At some point you have to talk – even if it makes you feel awkward. There are no perfect words, but “What are you feeling?” can be a much better conversation starter than “How are you feeling?” Your response will be just fine if you use words that show interest, concern, encouragement and support. You might also start with:

- I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know that I care about you.
- I'm thinking of you.
- I'm sorry that you're going through this.

There are some things that people with cancer don't want to hear. It's not very helpful to be told that someone else had the same cancer and it was horrible, or they shouldn't worry because they have a “good kind of cancer.” And even if you've had cancer, remember that everyone's experience is different. So try not to say you know exactly how your friend feels.

✓ **Learn a bit about the cancer first**

Before visiting, be prepared for what you may see

Cancer comes in many forms. Each can have different effects. Your friend may not wish to explain theirs to you because it's draining emotionally and physically to do so again and again. You can learn about more than 100 types of cancer at cancer.ca. But don't assume you now know it all. You could also ask their caregiver or a mutual friend for the important facts.

Prepare yourself for changes in how your friend looks and acts. They may have lost some hair or gained weight, or they may be exhausted from treatment. Ask yourself how you felt the last time you were scared or very sick. How did you want to be treated? Follow your own advice.



✓ **Be sensitive to how your friend is feeling**

That means how they're feeling right now

A visit to your friend can boost their spirits and yours, plus give caregivers a much-needed break. Just remember always to contact them first and be sure they're up to it. Give them a chance to say no.

Understand too that their decision may change when you arrive. Never take it personally if they are suddenly too tired, cranky or ill for a visit. Tell them it's OK. Be prepared with these helpful tips:

- Turn off your phone and give them your undivided attention.
- Visit only if you have enough time. Feeling hurried isn't helping either of you.
- Make future plans together. It gives your friend something to look forward to and both of you something fun to talk about.
- Laugh and don't be afraid to have fun with your friend – but allow emotional space for any sadness too. Even if treatment is going well, your friend may start talking about serious things like funeral plans. You can help by listening. Then encourage your friend to talk things over with loved ones.

✓ **Ask to put their trash out for them**
Offer to shrink their to-do list

When a person has cancer, they are often overwhelmed emotionally and physically. You want to help. Instead of asking what you can do, be specific.

Say “I’m going shopping. Can I get you anything at the grocery store or pick up your prescriptions?” Or “Can I look after your kids for a couple of hours on the weekend or after school?”

Make sure your friend agrees that your idea is helpful. Once you put your mind to it, there are lots of ways to help:

- Walk the dog. Feed their cat.
- Do the laundry. Clean their home. Pick up the mail.
- Shovel the snow. Rake the leaves. Put up or take down holiday decorations.
- Mow the lawn. Weed the garden. Water the plants.
- Bring ready-made meals to freeze and reheat later.
- Drive your friend to and from medical appointments.

When you’ve said you will do something, do it. But if you’re sick, the most helpful thing you can do is keep your cold or flu germs to yourself. Reschedule the help you’ve offered or see if someone else can fill in for you.

✓ **Or ask to put their caregiver's trash out**

Cancer is hard on your friend's loved ones too

Being the main support for someone with cancer can be exhausting. By helping their caregiver, you're supporting that friend who has cancer. Any of the ideas from the other page work here too.

Why not organize all the help that people like you are offering?

Go online and search for "helping calendars" or "free online meal calendars." You can schedule the chores that need to be done in your friend's home and divide them among well-wishers. Or schedule people's visits to your friend. They often want to come at the same time. Be the point person who makes your friend's life a bit easier.

If you can do some chores or organize people doing chores, your friend and their family can focus on treatment and resting.

Use this space to write more ideas and suggest them to others.

✓ **Maybe bring a small gift**

At the very least, you'll have something to talk about

Let's make this clear: Your attention and presence is the best present you can give. So you are not expected to bring a gift, ever.

But if you're feeling uncomfortable and aren't sure what to say, giving something small can go a long way. (A simple greeting card can do it for you.) It doesn't have to be expensive. Something personal, like photographs of you together, a child's drawing or a video message from a group of friends or family, can get you talking.

Here are a few other ideas:

- magazines, books, music or DVDs
- gift cards for restaurants, groceries or gas
- note cards or a journal
- gift certificates for a housecleaning service
- pajamas or a robe

Are you living far from your friend? Mailing a gift from a distance provides a great reason to call to make sure they received it. Then, if they're up to it, you can visit by phone.



✓ Go ahead and touch your friend

Remember, you can't "catch" cancer

Again, it's normal to feel uncomfortable visiting a friend who has cancer. But just by showing up and listening, you can make your friend feel less alone. The same goes for touching them. A warm hug for a friend who needs it can say more than hours of awkward conversation.

(Of course some people don't want to be touched. Remember **4** **Be sensitive to how your friend is feeling.**)

No matter how your friend looks or how ill they are, you will not get sick by getting close to them. Cancer is not contagious. So go ahead. Reach out and make contact if it feels right. Your support goes a long way and your friend and their caregivers will not forget it.



✓ **Keep offering even after others stop**

Your friend may still need help months later

A cancer diagnosis is always a shock. No wonder we want to help when we first learn about it. But this goodwill often fades over time, even though it's needed just as much. Cancer treatment and recovery can take a long time.

Sometimes cancer comes back. If it does, your friend may react and cope differently than the first time. The help and support they need may be different this time too. Talk about how you can help before doing the same things you did the last time they had cancer.

Are the holidays coming up? Everyone is busy, which means your friend may need you more than ever. Support might mean helping with the practical stuff – offer to pick up gifts, prepare special foods or take a child to school events. Or it might mean recognizing that your friend doesn't feel much like celebrating anything right now.

✓ **Understand that every diagnosis is unique**

Don't assume your friend will feel a certain way

Each cancer diagnosis is different. So is the reaction of everyone diagnosed. Your friend can be feeling any of a wide variety of emotions. Those feelings, moods and outlooks can change daily or even hourly.

You simply cannot predict how they are feeling or know what they're going through. Respect your friend's moods and respect how they choose to cope.

And know this: By reading this brochure and becoming better informed, you are already helping your friend. And remember where we started. Just sitting and listening is among the best things you can do for them.





Canadian Cancer Society

We're here for you.

When you have questions about treatment, diagnosis, care or services, we will help you find answers.

Call our toll-free number 1 888 939-3333.



Ask a trained cancer information specialist your questions about cancer. Call us or email info@cis.cancer.ca.



Connect with people online to join discussions, get support and help others. Visit cancerconnection.ca.



Browse Canada's most trusted online source of information on all types of cancer. Visit cancer.ca.

Our services are free and confidential. Many are available in other languages through interpreters.

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What we do

The Canadian Cancer Society fights cancer by:

- doing everything we can to prevent cancer
- funding research to outsmart cancer
- empowering, informing and supporting Canadians living with cancer
- advocating for public policies to improve the health of Canadians
- rallying Canadians to get involved in the fight against cancer

Contact us for up-to-date information about cancer and our services or to make a donation.



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