

# What Can I Say to a Newly Diagnosed Loved One?

If you have a loved one or friend who has been diagnosed with cancer, it can be difficult to find the right words to say. Studies show that people do better emotionally in a crisis if they have strong support from family and friends.



Here are some tips for being as supportive as possible during this difficult time:

**Listen.** This is a challenge when a person we love faces a life-threatening illness. It is important to listen without judging and without “cheerleading.” We are often tempted to say “you will be fine” when we hear scary or sad thoughts. Your ability to sit with your loved one as he or she shares those feelings is one of the most significant contributions you can make to the person’s well-being.

**Stay connected.** Cancer treatment can be lengthy; people with cancer often express that “people don’t call any more” after the initial crisis of diagnosis. Checking in regularly over the long haul is tremendously helpful.

**Give advice when you are asked.** You might offer to research the diagnosis, treatment, or clinical trials. That could be helpful, as the information is often overwhelming. What is not helpful is saying, “You ought to try....”

**Educate yourself about cancer.** CancerCare and other established organizations have helpful literature and user-friendly websites that provide detailed information about cancer and treatment.

**Remember the caregiver.** This is usually the spouse, partner, parent or adult child of the person with cancer who takes on necessary tasks such as driving to treatment, arranging medical appointments, and providing emotional support. Often, this person also takes on the roles formerly handled by the person with cancer, managing additional household chores and responsibilities.

**Be specific about the help you can offer.** Saying “call me if you need something” can put your loved one in an uncomfortable position. It is better to say, “May I walk your dog every morning?” or “Let me take you to radiation on Tuesday.”

**Keep things normal.** Often we want to make life easier for someone dealing with a serious illness by “doing things” for them. It is a way of feeling useful at

(over)

a time when we feel helpless. However, it's just as important to be sensitive to the person's wish to do normal "pre-cancer" tasks. For some people, being able to do things like hang curtains, cook dinner, or continue working can lessen the sense that cancer is taking over their lives.

**Be receptive to your loved one's needs when treatment is over.** Often this is the time that people with cancer realize the enormity of what they have been through (prior to this, they are deeply involved and distracted by the "work" of getting to treatment, having tests, and so on). While your loved one may not need rides to treatment anymore, he or she may still need your receptive ears.

**Support your loved one's treatment decisions.** This includes end-of-life choices if treatment is not successful. While you may be in a position to share decision-making, ultimately it is your loved one's body and spirit that bear the impact of the cancer. If your loved one chooses to stop treatment, this is a time when emotional support is especially crucial. Listening, once again, can be the greatest gift you have to give.

### **CancerCare Can Help**

CancerCare's staff of professional oncology social workers is available to help you cope with a diagnosis of cancer. Our social workers offer people with cancer and their loved ones individual counseling and support groups over the telephone, online, or in person. CancerCare also provides education, practical help, and referrals to other resources that can help you cope with a cancer diagnosis.



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National Office 275 Seventh Avenue New York, NY 10001

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