How To Support Your Loved Ones

Cancer Communication Dos and Don'ts

Pamela Jones-van der Nagel, MSW, CSW, OSW-C, leads one of nine different cancer support groups at the Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center

INDIVIDUALS who receive a cancer diagnosis will forever view themselves, and the world in which they live, in a different way. But the core of who they are — their personalities and the ways in which they communicate — is still intact. More than ever, they will need to know that they can count on the love, understanding and support of their families and close friends.

A cancer diagnosis, however, often changes the ways in which we communicate with our loved ones. Whether we're scared, feeling awkward, or don't know what to say, we are often worried we will say the wrong thing. How we communicate with loved ones, family members, acquaintances or even strangers who are living with cancer, is an important way to show love and support. Supporting someone with cancer requires paying attention to what that individual wants and needs, and knowing what to do and what not to do.

Do

1. Listen, listen, listen. Start with, "How may I help? I'm here if you need me." Then, give the person time to respond.

2. Simple things are helpful. "I'm going to the store. Would you like to come with me or is there anything I can pick up for you?" "I'm running errands this afternoon and I'd be happy to pick your children up from school."

3. Tell your loved ones that you love them. Your actions are important but hearing those words is very important. If you don't know someone well, tell them you're thinking about them and leave it at that.

4. Share humorous books and movies. Laughter is often a welcome relief.

5. Sometimes a cancer patient just wants someone to sit quietly with them. They may not feel like talking, but will appreciate the comfort of having someone there.

Don't

1. Don't share cancer stories, advice or what you've learned about cancer online.

2. Avoid saying things like, "You're going to be just fine." Instead, say, "I'm really thinking about you and I hope you'll be feeling better soon."

3. Be cautious about saying, "I'm praying for you." The person might feel like things must really be bad if you're praying for them. Let your relationship with the individual guide "praying for you" comments.

4. Don't disappear. People often retreat because they don't know what to say, or are afraid. Communicate what you can do for your friend, but don't disappear.

5. Avoid medical jargon like, "What's your prognosis?" or "Are you in remission?" You may be well meaning but it's not what a cancer patient wants to hear.

Support Groups — A Time to Learn, A Time to Share

Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center offers nine different cancer support groups, all led by oncology professionals. According to Alison Mayer Sachs, MSW, CSW, OSW-C, support groups are educational by nature. "Support groups are not therapy sessions. There's a difference," says Sachs. "Support groups provide a safe environment for people to share their experience that is similar to others in the group. And it's important that support groups are led by professionals experienced in working with cancer patients."

"Support groups can also be a great resource for information," continues Sachs. "In this Internet age, we are often inundated with information, but it's difficult to discern what is valid or useful. A well run support group guides its members through this over abundance of information, helping them become active participants and informed members of their health care team."

Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center Support Groups

Cancer and Caregivers	Myeloma
Bereavement (2 groups)	Bladder
Breast Cancer	Ostomy
Metastatic Breast Cancer	Look Good-Feel Better

For more information, call 760-834-3798. To view a group schedule online, visit emc.org/calendar and click on support groups.

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