

**DEALING WITH PERSONS WITH CANCER & THEIR FAMILIES**

**Although each person with cancer is different, here are some general guidelines for engaging with a person with cancer:**

* Communication is the key. Continue to treat persons with cancer as normally as possible.
* Ask about their interests, hobbies, and other topics not related to cancer—people going through treatment sometimes need a break from talking about their disease.
* Avoid offering advice they don’t ask for, or being judgmental. Avoid being patronizing. (Try not to use a “How sick are you today?” tone when asking how the person is doing.)
* Do **not** tell the person with cancer, “I can imagine how you must feel,” because you really can’t.
* Take your cues from the person with cancer. Some people are very private while others will openly talk about their illness. Respect the person’s need to share or their need for privacy.
* Allow for sadness—do not ignore uncomfortable topics or feelings.
* Listen without always feeling that you have to respond. Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs the most.
* Expect the person with cancer to have good days and bad days, emotionally and physically.
* Make flexible plans that can be easily changed in case something comes up or the person with cancer (and/or their family) needs to cancel or reschedule.
* Communication with the patient and or/family is very important. Consider a phone call or email rather than a text message.
* Avoid wearing any scent (body lotion, perfume, aftershave and so on). Sometimes persons with cancer are very sensitive to scent when they’re having chemotherapy.
* Do **not** give medical advice or talk about someone else’s cancer experience.

**How to be a good listener:**

* Try to keep the setting as private as possible. Do your best to look comfortable and relaxed, even if you’re nervous.
* Keep a comfortable amount of space between you and the person with cancer. Too much distance can make things feel formal and too little can feel cramped. Try to make sure there are no physical obstacles between you and the person with cancer.
* Let the person with cancer be the leader. If they want to talk, listen. Don’t be offended if they don’t want to talk.
* Try to keep eye contact, but don’t maintain it for so long that it feels like staring. Be aware of how the other person feels (there may be different cultural approaches to eye contact).
* Don’t interrupt. Wait for the person with cancer to stop speaking before you start, and give your full attention to what the person with cancer is saying. Try not to jump ahead in your thoughts to how you’re going to reply or what you’ll say next.
* Encourage the person with cancer to talk freely. It can help to nod and say things like, “Yes, I see” or “And then what happened?” You can also try repeating a few words from their last sentence – this will help them feel that they are being heard.
* Admit that you don’t know what to say or that you find things difficult to talk about. Getting this out in the open can actually help the conversation because it reduces feelings of awkwardness.

**Here are some comments to use or avoid when talking with a person with cancer:**

***Do say***

* What are you feeling? (This may help someone start talking more than asking, ‘*How* are you feeling’?)
* What is the worst part of this for you and how can I help make that a bit easier for you?
* I’m sorry you are going through this.
* If you ever feel like talking, I am here to listen.
* I’m not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care.

***Avoid saying***

* I know just how you feel. (If you haven’t had the same exact experience with cancer, then you don’t.)
* You need to talk.
* I know just what you should do.
* I don't know how you manage.
* I’m sure you’ll be fine.
* You’re so brave/ You’re so strong (Can put pressure on them to act brave/ strong when they may not feel that way.)
* Don’t worry.
* How much time do the doctors give you?
* How long do you have?
* I know someone who had the same thing and it was really horrible.
* I feel so bad about this. It’s making me cry all the time. (This isn’t about you.)

## ****Educate yourself about cancer.****  American Cancer Society and other reputable organizations have helpful literature and user-friendly websites that provide detailed information about cancer treatments, side effects, and other related concerns.

* **Remember the family caregiver.** This is usually the spouse, partner, parent or adult child of the person with cancer. Caregivers take on necessary tasks such as driving to treatment, arranging medical appointments, and providing needed care and emotional support. In many cases, they also take on many of the roles formerly handled by the person who has been diagnosed.

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