



## How to Support a Co-worker or Friend with Cancer

## living with cancer

You can help a co-worker or friend who has cancer in many different ways. Having cancer has probably turned their world upside down because they have so many new things to cope with. The right support can make a big difference to someone's cancer experience.

### Be a Good Listener

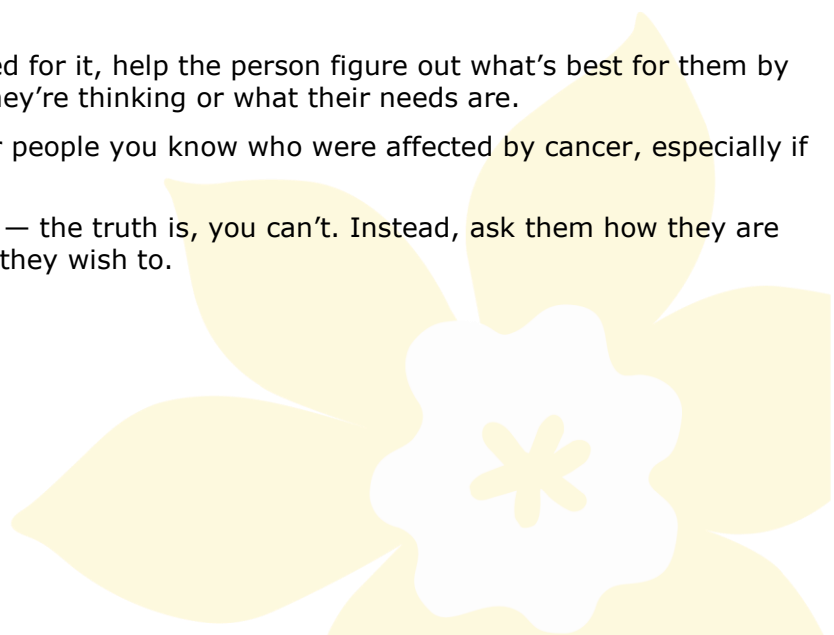
It can be very surprising to find out that someone you know has cancer, especially if the person is young or seemed in good health. It's normal to wonder what to say or how to react. The best way to react is to show you care and be willing to listen when someone tells you about their diagnosis. Watch and listen carefully to find out what kind of support they need from you.

#### Some helpful dos:

- Let the person with cancer be the leader of the conversation. When they want to talk, listen — and listen to **how** they talk not just to what they say.
- Respect their wishes. Some days they may want to talk about it, but other days they may not. Follow their lead and don't be pushy.
- Try to relate to the person in the same way you did before you found out about the cancer diagnosis. Your friend or co-worker is still the same person and should not be defined by their illness. Talking about normal work activities or other regular topics of discussion can help make sure that cancer does not become the topic of every conversation.
- Be comfortable with silence. It can be positive and even comforting. You don't always have to know what to say.
- Laugh and respond to humour if the person with cancer uses it.

#### Some helpful don'ts:

- Don't offer advice. If you're asked for it, help the person figure out what's best for them by asking them more about what they're thinking or what their needs are.
- Don't tell the person about other people you know who were affected by cancer, especially if they died. It just doesn't help.
- Don't say "I know how you feel" — the truth is, you can't. Instead, ask them how they are feeling and let them share what they wish to.





- Don't tell people to "cheer up" or that "it's all going to be all right." This can make you seem insensitive or even insulting. It is better just to let someone with cancer tell you how they feel and make sure they know that they have your support.
- Don't tell someone to "stay positive." This puts pressure on people to behave a certain way and can make them feel judged if they aren't being or staying positive. You can support their efforts if they tell you they are trying to stay positive, but it's not helpful if you tell them what to think or how to feel.

## Offer Practical Help

Along with being a good listener, you might want to offer practical help to a co-worker or friend who has cancer. What you offer will depend on your relationship. You can offer to keep the person informed of what is going on in the office while they are away for treatments or appointments. That gives them one less thing to worry about.

You could cook and deliver a meal or offer a ride to treatment. You might think about or ask what will help keep life as normal as possible. Following a familiar routine can be very reassuring for someone living with cancer. Make sure you follow through with any help that you offer. Be reliable and dependable, rather than another source of stress.

Keep offering support as their treatment progresses. Often a person has lots of help at first but not enough as time goes on. It may be needed and even more important as treatment continues.

If you do want offer to help, make your offer very specific. Asking "When can I ..." rather than "What can I ..." may make it easier for a co-worker or friend to accept your help.

## For More Information

The Canadian Cancer Society offers a variety of services to support individuals and their caregivers going through a cancer experience. Please visit [cancer.ca](http://cancer.ca) or call our Cancer Information Service for more information - 1-888-939-3333 or email [info@cis.cancer.ca](mailto:info@cis.cancer.ca). Ask about specific services available in your community to assist you during this time in your life.

**Sources:** [Canadian Cancer Society – Helping Someone with Cancer](#); [Emotions and Cancer](#)

