

Ways to Respond

What should I say to the person who has cancer?

You are not alone if you do not know what to say to someone who has cancer. You might not know the person very well, or you may have a close relationship. The most important thing you can do is mention the situation in some way that feels comfortable for you. You can show interest and concern, you can express encouragement, or you can offer support. Sometimes the simplest expressions of concern are the most meaningful. And sometimes just listening is the most helpful thing you can do.

Respond from your heart! Here are some ideas:

- “I am not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care.”
- “I am sorry to hear that you are going through this.”
- “How are you doing?”
- “If you would like to talk about it, I am here.”
- “Please let me know how I can help.”
- “I will keep you in my thoughts.”

While it is good to be encouraging, it is also important not to show false optimism or tell the person with cancer to always stay positive. Doing these things might seem to discount their very real fears, concerns, or sad feelings. It is also tempting to say that you know how the person feels. But while you may know this is a trying time, no one can know exactly how any person with cancer feels.

Using humor can be an important way of coping. It can also be another approach to support and encouragement. Let the person with cancer take the lead; it is healthy if they find something funny about a side effect, like hair loss or increased appetite, and you can certainly join them in a good laugh. This can be a great way to relieve stress and take a break from the more serious nature of the situation. But you never want to joke unless you know the person with cancer can handle it and appreciate the humor.

When the person with cancer looks good, let them know! Avoid making comments when their appearance is not as good, such as “You are looking pale,” or “You have lost weight.” It is very likely that they are acutely aware of it, and they may feel embarrassed if people comment on it.

It is usually best not to share stories about family members or friends who have had cancer. Everyone is different, and these stories may not be helpful. Instead, it is OK to let them know that you are familiar with cancer because you have been through it with someone else. Then they can pick up the conversation from there.

What about confidentiality?

Respecting privacy is very important. If someone tells you that they have cancer, you should never tell anyone else unless they have given you permission. Let them be the one to tell others. If someone else asks

you about it, you can say something like, “It is not up to me to discuss this, but I am sure Ann will appreciate your concern. I will let her know you asked about her.”

It might feel awkward if you hear “through the grapevine” that someone has cancer. You could ask the person who told you if it is public information. If it is not, you probably should not say anything to the person with cancer. But if it is public information, do not ignore it. You might say, in a caring way, “I heard what is happening, and I am sorry.”

You may feel angry or hurt if someone who is close to you did not share the news of a cancer diagnosis with you right away. No matter how close you are, it may take time for the person to adjust to the diagnosis and be ready to tell others. Do not take it personally. Focus on how you can support that person now that you know.

How do I overcome feeling uncomfortable when I am around the person who has cancer?

Feeling sorry for your friend, or feeling guilty for being healthy yourself, are normal responses. But by turning those feelings into offerings of support you make the feelings useful. Asking how you can help can take away some of the awkwardness. Cancer is a scary disease. It can create a great deal of uneasiness for people who do not have experience dealing with it. Do not be ashamed of your own fears or discomfort. Be honest with the person about how you feel. You might find that talking about it is easier than you think.

Remember to take care of yourself. If you are close in age to the person with cancer or if you are very fond of them, you may find that this experience creates anxiety for you. Cancer often reminds us of our own mortality. You might notice feelings somewhat like those of the person who has cancer: disbelief, sadness, uncertainty, anger, sleeplessness and fears about your own health. If this is the case, you may want to get support for yourself from a mental health professional or a local support group. If your company has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP), you can contact a counselor that way. You can also use other sources of counseling, such as your health insurance or religious support services.



Because Everyone's Journey IS Different

NOTE: This document is from the American Cancer Society and is taken from www.cancer.org