

Eight Ways to Help a Friend Who is Ill

by Dr. Delia Chiaramonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Do you have a friend who is facing a serious illness? If so, you may have found yourself unsure of exactly what to do. You want to be helpful, of course. But how? Here are some tips for being the kind of friend that you'd want to have if you were sick.

- **Treat him like a person not a patient.** Getting a serious illness robs people of their regular person status and forces them to join the 'sick person' club. This is a blow to the self-esteem that increases their distress. Make sure your friend knows that you see him not his illness.
- **Follow her lead.** There will be times when your friend wants to talk about her illness and times when she doesn't. If you want to discuss all the details of her treatment options but she isn't up to it, hold your tongue.
- **Expect and accept emotional swings.** Your friend may be blue one day and hopeful the next. He may swing wildly from depression to venomous anger. Don't get too attached to one point of view, because it might be different by tomorrow.
- **Find out what she needs.** Sick people get a lot of casseroles. To a point these are helpful, but maybe your friend needs other things too. Yard work? Dog walking? Childcare? Don't limit your helping to providing food.
- **Don't avoid him.** Illness can be scary and your friend may look different than he used to. Maybe he is thinner or bald or walks with a limp. If you aren't careful you might find yourself subconsciously avoiding even a dear friend. Watch for the tendency to avoid your sick friend, and then just get over it.
- **Don't be afraid to laugh.** Even serious things can be funny. It isn't against the rules to laugh about illness as long as your friend feels like laughing too.
- **Avoid the tyranny of the positive attitude.** Some of the most hurtful comments masquerade as helpfulness. Phrases such as "keep a positive attitude—it will help you get well" and "I'm sure everything will work out fine" can invalidate your friend's

feelings and make him feel even worse.

- **Don't disappear.** At the beginning of an illness there are tons of helpers and lots of attention. But unfortunately supporters tend to lose interest long before the treatment is completed. If you think you'll burn out from helping too much in the beginning, pace yourself so you can stick around longer.

It is hard to see a friend battle serious illness. It can be scary, tiring, and it can even re-awaken your own issues of fear and grief. But it can also be a time of tremendous closeness. Offering yourself at such a vulnerable time in your friend's life may deepen your friendship more than you could have imagined. It is important. It is the right thing to do. And it is definitely worth it.

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