

Helping A Friend Through Cancer - Dos and Don'ts

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



(photo courtesy of ACS)

You probably know someone who has had cancer. Maybe someone you know has it right now. We all know that cancer is terrifying and stressful and just plain awful for the person who has it, but the patient isn't the only ones who suffers. If you care about someone who is battling cancer, you are suffering too.

It can be hard to know what to say and what to do. Should you give your friend space and privacy or show up every night with casseroles? Do you try to cheer her up? Encourage him to share his feelings?

You may feel out of your league.

Everyone is different, of course, so there is no playbook for your particular situation. But there are some guidelines that can help you to be an effective supporter.

DO tell your friend that you will be there for her through the whole ordeal in whatever way works best for her.

DON'T tell him stories about other people with the same cancer who didn't do well or endured difficult symptoms.

DO accept her coping style without judgment. She may be in denial one day and consumed by fear the next. Just be there.

DON'T tell him to 'think positively.' This can add stress, fear and feelings of isolation to an already difficult situation. While a positive attitude is nice, it is not required. A recent study showed that having a positive attitude did not improve survival.

DO treat your loved one that same as you always have. Avoid pity – it makes people feel worse.

DON'T say "cancer can be such a blessing." Most people battling cancer don't feel all that blessed. There can be silver linings that manifest along the way, but platitudes like the one above will only make your friend want to smack you.

DO ask permission. Before you come over, before you bring a casserole, before you tell others about the cancer, etc. Getting cancer robs people of control. Be sure not to add to the problem.

DON'T worry too much about saying the wrong thing. If you accidentally say something insensitive, just apologize sincerely and move on. If you tiptoe around your

loved one too much, it will make her feel lonely and disconnected from you.

DO offer specific help without being asked. “Just call me if you need anything” doesn’t cut it. Try “can I pick your kids up from school this week?” instead.

DON’T disappear. It is stressful when a loved one has cancer and if you aren’t careful, you might disconnect from him without meaning to. Maintain regular contact, even if it is just an email or phone message.

DO take care of yourself too. It is hard when someone you care about has cancer and you need support too. Since you can’t get it from your loved one, you’ll need to find other people to help you cope with this difficult experience.

You can’t fix it. You shouldn’t run away from it. All you can do is walk this difficult path alongside your loved one and offer support when it is needed.

“Don’t just do something, stand there.”

Warmly,

Dr. C

www.insightmedicalconsultants.com

Dr. Chiamonte is a private Health Advocate and the founder of Insight Medical Consultants. She has been quoted by CNN, The Wall Street Journal and USA Today as an expert on patient advocacy.

www.InsightMedicalConsultants.com