



CANCERcare®

800-813-HOPE (4673)  
info@cancer.org  
www.cancer.org

# fact sheet

## WHAT CAN I SAY TO A NEWLY DIAGNOSED LOVED ONE?

Studies show that people do better emotionally in a crisis when they have strong support from family members and friends. However, if one of your friends or loved ones has been diagnosed with cancer, you might be having a difficult time knowing what to say or how best to help.

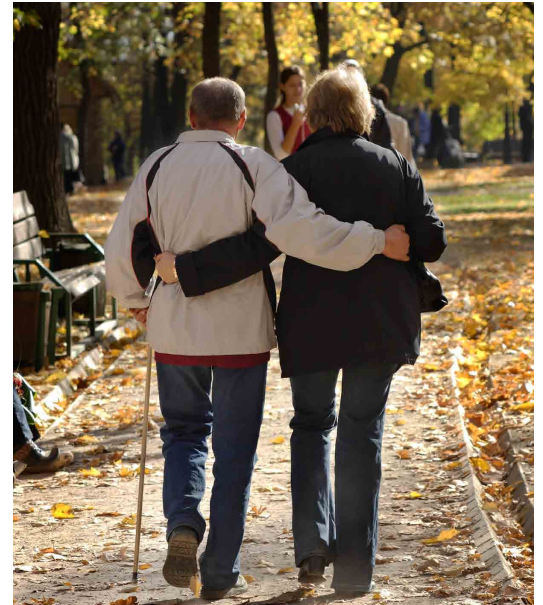
### HERE ARE SOME TIPS FOR BEING AS SUPPORTIVE AS POSSIBLE WHEN A LOVED ONE IS DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER:

**Listen.** This is often a challenge when a loved one faces a life-threatening diagnosis. Try to listen without judging and without “cheerleading.” Your ability to sit with your loved one as they share those feelings is probably one of the most significant contributions you can make to your loved one’s well-being.

**Give advice only when you are asked.** Friends and loved ones often take on the task of researching the diagnosis, treatment options or clinical trials. This can be very helpful, as the information is often overwhelming. What is not helpful is saying, “You ought to try this” or “You should do that.” Instead, let your loved one know you’ve done research and allow your loved one to decide if they want to know more.

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

**Support your loved one’s treatment decisions.** While you may be in a position to share decision-making, ultimately it is your loved one’s body and spirit that bear the impact of the cancer.



**Remember the 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. The caregiver can also benefit from additional help with these tasks.

**Stay connected.** Cancer treatment can be lengthy, and the cancer journey continues past the last day of treatment. People with cancer often note that friends and family “don’t call anymore” after the initial crisis of diagnosis. Checking in regularly over the long haul is both tremendously helpful and very meaningful for the person living with cancer.

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**Keep things normal.** Often, we try to make life easier for the person going through cancer by “doing things” for them. It is a way of feeling useful at a time when we would otherwise feel helpless. However, it’s just as important to respect your loved one’s wishes to do normal “pre-cancer” tasks. For some people, being able to do things like cook dinner or continue working can lessen the sense that cancer is taking over their lives. Your loved one may not want to discuss their cancer and it might be helpful to make conversation that doesn’t involve their diagnosis.

**Be receptive to your loved one’s needs when treatment is over.** This is often the time when people begin to process the enormity of what they have been through. Prior to this, they were deeply involved in, and distracted by, all the medical concerns such as getting to treatment and coping with side effects. While your loved one may no longer need help getting through treatment, they may still need your emotional support.

**Be there.** Think about how you’ve helped each other feel better during a difficult time in the past. This could be something as simple as sitting with your loved one during treatments. Do whatever works for you both, and don’t be afraid to try something new.

### CancerCare® Can Help

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by professional oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercares.org](http://www.cancercares.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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### TRY TO AVOID SAYING:

- **“Everything is going to fine.”** Going through cancer is often described as an emotional roller coaster, with many ups and downs. We are often tempted to say “you will be fine” when we hear scary or sad thoughts, but false platitudes may signal to the person living with cancer that you are unwilling or unable to discuss the realities and challenges of their situation.
- **“You’ve got the good kind of cancer.”** Any cancer diagnosis turns a person’s world upside down—emotionally, physically and financially. There is no “good kind.”
- **“At least you’re alive.”** While it is good to look for the positives in a bad situation, a statement like this can minimize what your loved one is going through. A cancer diagnosis is often challenging and can be a scary, isolating experience.
- **Nothing at all.** It is hard to watch someone you care about cope with a cancer diagnosis. It’s okay to admit that you’re not sure what the right thing to say is or how you can help. The most important part is to start the conversation.

### DO SAY:

- **“Count me in to help out.”** Your loved one may feel embarrassed to ask for help or may feel like they are burdening you, so make your loved one a specific offer. Tell your loved one how and when you can help them and/or the caregiver. These tasks can include walking the dog every morning, shopping for groceries or driving the person to treatment.
- **“We’re going to get through this together.”** Reassuring your loved one that you will be there for them is comforting.
- **“I’m here if you need to talk.”** Saying this can help create an environment where your loved one feels comfortable and able to express themselves without judgment. People living with cancer often talk about their cancer because others ask. Allowing your loved one to bring it up themselves will allow conversations about their diagnosis to happen on their terms instead.

*Edited by Mary Hanley, MSW*

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National Office • 275 Seventh Avenue • New York, NY 10001

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