

CONVERSATION TIPS ABOUT CANCER

APPROACHES ON PROVIDING SUPPORT



Nearly 2 out of 5 Americans will be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetime.¹

It's likely that a friend, associate, or coworker will share that news with you, about either themselves or a close family member. What do you say to that person? A cancer diagnosis can bring with it intense emotional and financial strain. Knowing how to help that person navigate the difficulties ahead or ease concerns about disruptions at home or work can make a big difference for everyone involved.

Here are some ways you can help:



BE SUPPORTIVE

You may be one of the most important sources of support for someone diagnosed with cancer. When the person shares the news with you, express your concern. Make yourself available whenever he or she needs to talk, and let the person know that you are here to help, even if it's just to listen.²

Keep the following in mind during your conversations^{2,3}:

DO

- Show empathy. "I'm sorry you're going through this."
- Be sure to keep the focus of any cancer-related conversation on the person. Avoid talking about the experiences of other people who have had cancer
- Feel free to discuss things other than cancer if the conversation goes that way. Help the person focus on positive topics, such as pets, TV, or sports
- Recognize that there is no "right" way for a person with cancer to react. One person may use humor as a coping skill, while another person might become angry or depressed
- Ask questions; show that you value his or her input and opinions

DON'T

- Don't show false optimism or say that you know how the person feels
- Don't offer medical advice
- Don't be afraid of silence. The conversation may go quiet for a while, and that's all right
- Don't be judgmental or make assumptions about what kind of activities the person can or can't do
- Don't be afraid to touch or shake hands if that is a normal interaction for both of you



BE KNOWLEDGEABLE

A basic understanding of cancer, its treatment, and the possible side effects of that treatment may help you gain better insight into what your friend or associate is going through.

Become familiar with cancer and its effects and offer to help the person gather information. For instance, if asked, help the person come up with a list of questions for his or her Human Resources department. Here are a few subjects you could explore^{2,4}:



Company policy on changes in work schedule, and how it might affect insurance and benefits



An employee assistance program that provides counseling



Resources in the community, such as a local chapter of the American Cancer Society



Other local help, such as arranging meal preparation, grocery shopping, or child or pet care



UNDERSTAND THAT THERE ARE BOUNDARIES

While support is important, always keep in mind the person's wishes and privacy, whether he or she is a friend, associate, or coworker.

The person may not want you to share news of his or her cancer with others. Respect the person's wishes. If you're not sure how the person feels, then refrain from telling others.² In addition, keep in mind that having cancer *is* a disability. The person has a legal right to privacy about it, just as he or she would with any medical condition.⁵

If you want to help the person learn more about privacy and other rights, read up on the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**, which covers people who have a cancer diagnosis, and the **Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)**, which describes the rights available to people who need to take time off if a serious health condition prevents them from performing key functions of their job.⁵

ADA information: <https://www.ada.gov>

FMLA information: <https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs28.pdf>

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) information: <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/cancer.cfm>

Keep in mind, too, that the person may not want your help. Try not to be hurt if your support is rejected. Understand that it may be a matter of pride, and continue to offer emotional support. Show that you still care, regardless of any changes in the person's life or appearance.³



GATHER RESOURCES

Explore support programs that may be available in your region or at your workplace. You will also find a wealth of information at the American Cancer Society. Visit it at www.cancer.org to read advice for patients, caregivers, loved ones, and coworkers.

References:

1. National Cancer Institute. Cancer statistics. <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/understanding/statistics>. Updated April 27, 2018. Accessed July 19, 2019.
2. American Cancer Society. When someone you know has cancer. <https://www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/talking-about-cancer/when-someone-you-know-has-cancer.html>. Updated April 29, 2016. Accessed July 19, 2019.
3. American Cancer Society. How to be a friend to someone with cancer. <https://www.cancer.org/treatment/understanding-your-diagnosis/talking-about-cancer/how-to-be-a-friend-to-someone-with-cancer.html>. Updated January 25, 2016. Accessed July 19, 2019.
4. Merck Oncology. FAQs about living with cancer. <https://www.yoursupportresource.com/cancer-faqs/>. Accessed July 19, 2019.
5. US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Questions & answers about cancer in the workplace and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). <https://www.eeoc.gov/laws/types/cancer.cfm>. Accessed July 19, 2019.

