



# How can I help?

Supporting someone with cancer



For information and support, call  
**13 11 20** or visit [cancercouncil.com.au](http://cancercouncil.com.au)

# What to say and do

When someone you know is diagnosed with cancer, you might want to talk to them about it but not know how. You may be worried about saying the wrong thing or intruding. Sometimes the person with cancer will raise the topic and you may find it difficult to come up with the right words to say.

It's normal to feel lost for words, no matter how close you are to the person who has cancer. There isn't one perfect script – what you say will probably depend on your relationship, your past experiences and your personality.

This information brochure provides a guide to what a person with cancer may be going through. It also offers ideas about what you might say and do. Not everyone will respond to a cancer diagnosis in the same way, so there is no one right way to provide support.



# Be understanding

Everyone's experience of cancer is unique. Even if you've had cancer yourself, what another person goes through will be different. Try not to assume how they might be feeling but make time to listen to their concerns. Your support can be very important during this time.

A person with cancer may experience:

**Physical side effects** – During treatment, they may be coping with side effects such as nausea, vomiting, skin changes, infections and hair loss. Some side effects such as fatigue and brain fog can be significant and continue even after treatment finishes.

**A flood of emotions** – When the future is uncertain, this can cause a range of feelings, including fear, worry, anger, sadness, vulnerability, and a lack of confidence or sense of self worth. A cancer diagnosis may make a person reflect on their life and mortality from a new perspective. This may lead to new goals and priorities.

**Practical concerns** – Cancer can bring other changes to a person's life. They may have to re-evaluate their financial plans or employment situation. A person's sense of independence may change, depending on whether they are able to keep up with their usual daily activities.

**Isolation** – Even if the person with cancer is surrounded by family and friends, they may sometimes still feel lonely and misunderstood. On the other hand, some people may appreciate having some time to themselves.

# Some helpful ideas

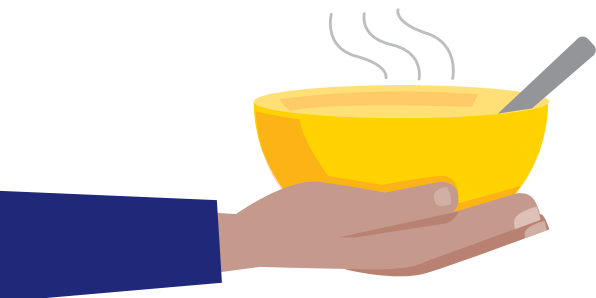
**There are many ways to show your concern or offer support to someone with cancer.**

## **Let them know you're willing to listen –**

Sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs most. If they want to talk about what they are going through, make eye contact, give them time to speak and try not to interrupt.

**Ask “Do you want to share what’s going on for you today?”** – From time to time throughout their treatment and recovery, ask the person how they are feeling. If you wait for the perfect time to ask, it may never come. Make the effort to really listen and respond to their answer. Emotions can change from day to day and however they are feeling at that moment is okay.

**Acknowledge life can be hard** – A person with cancer doesn't want to feel blamed or punished. Don't focus on what may have led to the cancer, but on how hard it is that people get cancer. It may help to recognise that sometimes bad things can happen to good people.





**Invite them places** – Continue inviting them to social events. Give them the option of declining or cancelling, even at the last minute. This helps them feel included and gives them a choice.

**Show them you care** – You might send a card, text or Facebook message, drop off a meal, follow them on social media, or say something in person. If you're upset and don't know exactly how to express your feelings, it's okay to just say so but don't put the burden on the person with cancer to make you feel better. Sometimes it's enough just to be there with them. Before visiting, check they feel well enough and can have visitors. Don't visit if you're unwell or have any cold or flu symptoms.

**Treat them the same** – If physical affection like hugging or hand holding was a normal part of your relationship before the cancer diagnosis, try to continue acting in the same way.

**Follow their lead** – Some people with cancer don't like to be called a cancer sufferer, battler, victim or survivor. Others don't like to talk about fighting cancer, as this may make them feel like they're losing. Pay attention to how they refer to themselves and follow suit.

**Talk about other things too** – Although it's important to ask how they're feeling, it's okay to chat about other things happening in both of your lives.

# Practical ways to help

People may find it hard to ask for practical help. Try to be as specific as possible with your offers, for example, “Would you like me to mind the kids on treatment days?”



Go grocery shopping, help with cleaning or laundry, or make some meals.



*“You’re just not in the headspace to plan what you need done ... it was much more useful and more meaningful to have people just do things off their own bat, and I found that was really touching.”* Suzanne

Mind children or pets.





**Coordinate offers of help online through a group email or closed social media group.**



**Help with jobs around the garden.**

**Sit with them while they are having treatment.**



**Drive them to treatment or a support group meeting.**



# What is less helpful

## When you're trying to support someone, you may want to avoid:

### **Saying clichés or giving unrealistic assurances –**

Even though you might mean to be reassuring, saying “don’t worry” or “stay positive” can seem dismissive of how the person is feeling. It may also be unrealistic – of course they may worry and so might you. It’s normal to feel concerned about the situation.

**Offering advice –** The person with cancer needs to make their own decisions based on the advice of their medical team. If you’d like to share your opinion with the person, ask them if it would be helpful first.

**Sharing lots of stories –** You may know other friends or family members who have also had cancer, but this person may want to focus on their own health. Every person’s situation is different, even if they have the same cancer, so comparing stories may not be helpful.

*“I get sick of people telling me to think positive or be happy. Some days I really don’t feel positive and I feel pressured to appear that way for everyone else.”* John





**Making observations** – It's not always helpful to say, "you've lost weight" or "you don't look very sick". The person may be aware of it and pointing it out may make them feel self-conscious.

**Pushing particular beliefs** – All people have the right to their own beliefs and values, both religious and non-religious. The person with cancer also has the right to make their own decisions about their treatment and their life.

**Asking probing questions** – Depending on your relationship, the person may not want to tell you about something personal (e.g. their prognosis). Let them show you how much they want to talk about the diagnosis and treatment. Respect their right to keep things to themselves.

**Breaching confidentiality** – Respect the person's privacy and ask their permission before you share details about their health or treatment with anyone else. Try not to be offended if the person doesn't choose to confide in you.

**Drawing comparisons** – The person with cancer may be given more flexibility than usual with their responsibilities at work or home because of their illness. Don't compare their situation to yours. They're usually just getting help to make life as manageable as possible.

**Treating them differently** – If you don't know what to say or do, don't avoid them. Look people in the eye and talk in a normal conversational voice.

## What not to say



*“Everything is going to be all right.”*

*“I know exactly how you feel.”*

*“I can imagine how you feel.”*

*“Don’t worry about it.”*

*“How long do you have to live?”*

*“Just relax, don’t get worked up.”*

*“It will all work out in the end.”*

*“You look well.”*

*“I’m praying for you.”*



## What you could say



*“Do you mind me talking about your cancer and how you are feeling?”*

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*“I have been thinking of you. Please get in touch when you’re up to it and if you want to.”*

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*“Tell me how things are for you today?”*

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*“What would you like me to do for you today?”*

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*“Do you want to tell me what’s going on with you and the cancer treatment or should we talk about other things?”*

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*“I really want to help you. What can I do?”*

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*“I would like to bring dinner over tomorrow. Is 6pm okay for you?”*

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*“The whole time I was on chemotherapy and radiation therapy, my friend called me every day between 8–9am. She could hear if I was well by my voice. There aren’t many friends like that around.”* Meg

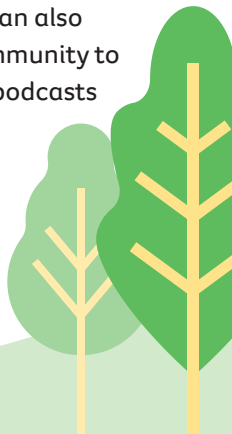
## Treat each other well

Like everyone, a person with cancer will probably have good and bad days. It's important to try to understand the extra pressures and changes a cancer diagnosis can bring, and how it might affect how a person feels and behaves. However, illness is not an excuse for mistreating other people. Respect and safety are essential in caring relationships.

If you're concerned about the behaviour of the person with cancer, try to talk to them or consider seeing a counsellor to talk about your feelings.

## Talk about it

It can be difficult to watch someone you care about go through a serious illness. You can call Cancer Council 13 11 20 to talk about how you're feeling or to ask any questions. Speaking to a counsellor may also be helpful. You can also visit our website, join our Online Community to connect with others or listen to our podcasts (see addresses below).



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