



Someone you love has cancer...

When someone is diagnosed with cancer or some other serious illness it impacts everyone that loves them. You may feel unsure of what to say to, or do for someone when they are newly diagnosed. You are probably feeling stunned, shocked or distressed and you may feel confronted with feelings of helplessness or powerlessness to change or 'fix' what has happened. This can feel like a deep anguish. Have compassion for yourself as you would for another person, as this might be very new emotional territory for you. The important thing is not to desert your friend (or yourself!) at a time when support is needed.

Practice compassion for yourself and for your loved one. This embodies a desire to ease their suffering and yours.

Here are some suggestions that you might find useful.

Do...

- ..acknowledge your own feelings of fear, sadness, anxiety or vulnerability if you have them and reach out for assistance if you need to. It's ok for you to get help when you feel upset or are confronted by your own mortality, helplessness or fears. Embracing this challenge will build confidence in your own resilience to deal with difficult issues when they arise in life. Seek out a counsellor if necessary. Several are listed on [our website](#) who have had a lot of experience in Quest retreats. You are not alone in feeling helpless and there's much that you can do that will make a profound or positive difference. Your feelings are as valid as the person who is dealing with the illness.
- ..communicate with your friend. Let them know that you feel upset, shocked, sad, distressed (or whatever) and that you are there for them. Only offer your assistance if you are willing to give it wholeheartedly.
- It's fine to say, "I can't imagine how you're feeling right now but I want you to know I'm here, and would like to support you in whatever way I can". This might take the form of dropping in a regular meal, organising a roster of friends to cook/clean/drive them to treatments/pick-up children/sit with them/iron/garden/mow the lawns/make phone calls/research therapies/therapists/[books](#) or [retreats](#) that may be of benefit - or whatever is of practical assistance.
- ..ask the person what would be most helpful and give some suggestions eg. as above.
- ..let the person know that you're happy to be of assistance and that you're also happy to be told to back off if such assistance is not required. "I'd love to help by doing xxxx but I need you to tell me if I'm being too pushy. Is that ok?"

- ..find a way to communicate about cancer. "Do you feel like talking or would you prefer to have a cancer-free day?" "I'm always happy to listen to what's happening for you but it's fine too if you don't feel like talking." "I struggle to believe this has happened to you but I sure want to find a way to share the journey with you if that's ok?" "Tell me to back off if I'm too 'in your face'! I'd just like to be part of your life." "I'm happy to do anything but you need to tell me when to stop. I'll be fine with that."
- ..be prepared for them to say 'no' to your offers of assistance. They need to surround themselves with people that feel 'right' for them at this time. Trust that they know what's best for themselves.
- If the person has a partner, ask *them* how they're feeling or if there's anything you can do for them. So often the emphasis is on the person with the illness while the partner may very well be struggling and in need of support too. Remember, cancer impacts everyone in different but often equally painful ways.
- ..write to the person if you find it too difficult to talk about your feelings. You may find "I notice, I imagine, I feel" a useful structure to write about the situation. [Click here](#) for more information.

Don't...

- ..assume that you know what's best for another person. There are no 'shoulds' as in, "You 'should' change your diet/meditate/read this book/stay positive/go to a Quest for Life retreat/talk to a counsellor/drink juice/be cheerful or whatever. Respectfully offer your ideas or assistance and be willing to hear that now isn't the right time, they're not interested in your ideas or that they don't want your assistance.
- ..say, "be positive" as it conveys that your loved one is only acceptable if they are 'up', coping and on top of everything. Being positive is all about being real with what's happening. It may be far more positive to say, "I feel scared, confused and a bit panicky" rather than "I feel fine", when that is not the truth. (FINE stands for Freaked out, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional!)
- ..tell them all your 'cancer stories'. They need to be listened to and supported and not told about other people's negative experiences. Even positive experiences need to be shared sensitively because you might convey that you are only willing to hear that your friend is fine/is coping/is determined to live, when really they need someone to hear their fears, concerns, ideas or anxieties. It's not about other people's stories; it's all about your friend and their experience or needs.
- ..expect that if you have a strained relationship that they will want to heal it. You may need to deal with your feelings of rejection. They may feel they have their hands full right now and reconciliation with you might not be on their agenda. You can express that you would love a reconciliation, but be willing to hear that they may not. You may find the structure of "I notice, I imagine, I feel" to be a useful tool to initiate a difficult conversation. It is often best expressed in a hand written letter (not an email or text) rather than a conversation.

- ..express your distressed emotions to the point where your friend feels they have to support you. If you're deeply upset, anxious or terrified, find someone who can help you resolve your issues rather than expect your friend with cancer to have to support you. It's fine to share tears, to weep in one another's arms, to share the anguish together, to hug and to hold. If you're overwhelmed with emotion to the point where you're not useful to support your friend then find someone outside of your relationship to assist you with your feelings.
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Conclusion...

There is no 'right way' to do cancer or to be a friend to someone with cancer. We are all human and it's ok to not get it right. As [Bernadette Arena](#), the facilitator of our Quest for Life retreat (for people with cancer and their loved ones), says when we stuff up: "How human of me!"

Your intention to be of service in a compassionate, humble and heartfelt way is sufficient motivation. To journey by the side of someone with cancer is a great privilege. It can also be challenging, rewarding and sometimes heartbreaking.

It is deeply satisfying to know that your presence and contribution makes a positive difference for someone else. And, as a young girl of ten once told me, "Sometimes hearts have to break before they heal." It's ok to cry, scream or express any emotion...you are not your feelings, you *have* feelings. Let the energy of them be expressed in ways that don't wound yourself or others.

Love turns up when it doesn't know what to do or what to say...love still turns up, preferably with a casserole in hand!

A loving gesture, a look or a hug can convey more than words at times and we are all learning to be better communicators. Good communication is a lifelong learning journey. Be gentle with yourself and your loved one and remember, with love, all things are possible.

There is more information about our residential retreats on the webpage. The [Quest for Life](#) retreat is tailored to meet the needs of both the person with cancer and their loved ones/partner. Some separate sessions are held for partners or loved ones as your issues are often very different to the person with the illness.

If living with cancer is no longer a challenging issue but your loved one is struggling to integrate the impact it has had on their life then our [Healing Your Life](#) retreat may well be of benefit. Please call to discuss your or your loved ones' needs and we will be happy to answer any questions you might have. Participants who are financially challenged can be supported to attend our retreats through NSW Health and [donations](#) to the Quest for Life Foundation and our [fundraising](#) efforts. We endeavour to turn no one away on financial grounds.

Petrea's books and CDs are often a very helpful place to start and provide practical tools and skills for living with challenging issues. You will find information about each of her books at www.questforlife.com.au/shop.

You will always receive a warm welcome if you contact us to talk about attending a retreat at Quest.

We look forward to our paths crossing with yours.