

TEN TIPS FOR HELPING A FRIEND WITH CANCER©

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Helping a friend with cancer can feel awkward. You may want to help a friend who is ill but don't know just how to do it. You don't want to do something wrong but aren't sure what will be well received. The greatest present you can bring them is your presence. How you prepare yourself is more important than what you say or do. Words and actions that arise from a loving and healing spirit almost always hit the mark. The following tips come from Drs. Bill and Susie Buchholz, an oncologist-psychologist team* with over twenty-three years experience working with patients and their caregivers.

1 Don't make assumptions.

Find out what is needed by asking or observing. Though you may feel more comfortable with a plan of what you're going to do or say before you call or visit your friend, don't let that plan blind you to what is needed at that moment. The circumstances may be different from what you expected. Be flexible and open to what your friend wants. If you are comfortable being spontaneous, come without an agenda.

2 Be aware of your projections.

We all have an image of cancer and what it's like to have it. Because your friend has been dealing with it personally, they may have a different understanding of the disease. Distinguish between your feelings and attitudes and theirs. If you feel anxious or depressed, is it something that you bring with you or is it coming from them? Unless you're going to their funeral, they are still alive and have a future. Treat them that way.

3 Show loving kindness toward yourself first.

If your purpose is to show your love and support for your friend, fill yourself first. You will have more to offer them if you come with a sense of being loved. An abundance of good will toward yourself leads to a generous spirit. Be nice to yourself.

4 Know what you can offer.

Unless you have special gifts or training, you probably won't be able to cure your friend. That doesn't mean you can't help them. Small things make a big difference. What you bring may be less important than how you present it. A few flowers from your garden may be more appreciated than a large bouquet delivered impersonally. Don't talk about food, just bring it. Bring small servings, attractively presented. You may provide practical help by organizing, delegating or recruiting support.

5 Cancer is a chronic disease.

There are many opportunities and many different things to offer. Needs change with time. Reassure friend you'll be with them for the long haul. Stay connected. If you're visiting, you don't have to stay long: consistency is more important than length.

6 Be transparent.

Being transparent means allowing the possible good to come through you rather than from you. Prepare yourself for meeting your friend by cleansing yourself of your own agenda. Coming empty-handed means you can provide what is necessary at that moment rather than what you anticipated before. Let the moment guide what you can do. Be present, be real.

7 Just listen.

Hear your friend without judgment: you can relieve many burdens they have carried because there was no place to lay them. If they are confused, help them find out what they want or need, not what you think they should have. It's ok to share your own feelings and attitudes if it's appropriate; it allows your friend to be important to you, too.

8 Be vulnerable.

If you are to become close, you have to be close to their pain. It will awaken your own pain. Beneath the anxiety, depression and suffering that sometimes accompanies cancer is the shared experience of being human and mortal. From that shared pain comes an intimate bond that can affirm both the preciousness of life and its fragility.

9 Discover beauty.

Encourage encounters with beauty and nature. Take your friend to a garden, the seashore, an art museum or concert. Bring them flowers, a shell from beach, pictures of waterfalls, a pretty rock from your hike or a CD of their favorite artist. Share what is beautiful in your life and theirs.

10 Honor your generosity.

Both you and your friend can be healed, each in your own way. Helping another soul enriches your life. It isn't selfish but an integral part of the process. Be grateful.

*For additional information and guidance please see their new book "Live Longer-Live Larger: A Holistic Approach for Cancer Patients and Families," by William M. Buchholz, M.D. and Susan W. Buchholz, Ph.D. published by O'Reilly and available through Drs. Buchholz web site www.buchholzmedgroup.com or by calling 650-988-8011.

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