
Thoughts on
Living with Cancer

**Suggestions for
Friends and Relatives
of the Cancer Patient**



by Caren S. Fried, Ph.D.

My Personal Experience

In 1994, I was told those fateful words: “You have cancer.” At that time, I was 35 years old, a biologist, wife, and mother of a two year old. I was diagnosed with lung cancer, even though I had never smoked. My cancer treatments included two major lung surgeries (which resulted in the removal of my right lung), various standard and experimental aggressive chemotherapy treatments, and numerous alternative therapies. Despite all this, my cancer persisted. But so did I!

A turning point occurred for me when I decided to focus on my health instead of my illness. I believe that cancer is an illness of the body, mind, heart, and soul. Therefore, for me being healthy meant dealing with the emotional, psychological, and spiritual issues related to cancer as well as undergoing the physical treatments. In addition to the various conventional and alternative therapies which I pursued, writing became an important part of my own healing journey with cancer. To be able to express my emotions, thoughts, and beliefs in writing was critically important for my own overall health.

These pamphlets grew from the numerous notes that I wrote every day in my healing journal. The information that is available for newly diagnosed cancer patients can sometimes be overwhelming. It was my intention, therefore, to write short pamphlets concerning various topics that deal with the practical issues of living each day with cancer. I hope that these pamphlets will encourage discussion of topics that are often difficult yet necessary to deal with and to help cancer patients and their families make the numerous decisions that need to be made during this time.

Healing is a very personal issue and each person must find his/her own path to healing from cancer. To this day, I continue to focus on my health each day, to live a full active life as a mother and wife, and to pursue a new career as a writer despite cancer. It is my hope that these pamphlets will be useful for others seeking out a healing journey while living with cancer and beyond.

Caren S. Fried

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Suggestions for Friends and Relatives of the Cancer Patient

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Suggestions for Friends and Relatives of the Cancer Patient

At times, the small everyday chores became burdensome. I greatly appreciated it when someone came to our house and simply offered to walk our dog.

—C.F.

As a friend or relative of a cancer patient, there is much you can do to help and support the patient and his/her immediate family during this very difficult time. The primary goal should be to enable patients to spend their time and energy on healing themselves. In addition, you can provide help and support for the immediate family whose lives have also been greatly disrupted by this disease.

It is important to recognize that the needs of the cancer patient and his/her family are unique for each situation. Use the following suggestions as a guideline, but be sure to ask the cancer patient or the primary caregiver if your actions are helpful to them. Keep in mind that while you want to provide help and support, it is also important to give patients the opportunity to help themselves. There is a fine line between helping cancer patients and treating them as though they are disabled. It is important to leave them the opportunity to do as



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much as they want to do themselves.

It is common for people to say to someone who is sick, "If you need anything, just let me know". However, many cancer patients are concerned about being a burden to others and often will not ask for help. It is much more beneficial to the patient if you offer to do a specific task. The following suggestions are intended to help answer the question "How can I help?"

Do household chores.

There are always plenty of household chores to do, including food shopping, cooking meals, laundry, taking out the garbage, washing the floors, vacuuming, etc. Be direct in your offer to help. Call the person and say that you are going to the store and you will pick up bread, milk, or whatever they want and bring it to their house in an hour. You can also find out what they like to eat and cook a meal for the cancer patient and their immediate family.

Be sure to complete a task that you have started. For example, if you bring food to the house, be sure to help put it away. If you offer to change the sheets on the bed, don't leave them by the washing machine. Wash them, fold them and put them away. If tasks are not completely finished, then patients may be left feeling like they have something else to do later.

Offer to be the organizer or communicator.

If the patient needs a great deal of help with the activities of daily living (cooking, cleaning, etc.), you can offer to arrange a group of friends and relatives who can do these chores. You can ask the patient for a list of chores that need to be done or help them write one. Then, you can be in charge of scheduling who can help, when they can help, and what they can do.

You can also offer to be the telephone contact person concerning the patient's health. The patient's medical situation will continually change and you can offer to be the one to provide health updates to extended family and friends.

Buy books, notepaper, audiotapes, videotapes.

You can buy books on cancer (information on cancer, inspiring stories about cancer survivors, etc) as well as books that have nothing to do with cancer (novels or humorous cartoon books). Audiotapes can be valuable if the patient does not feel well enough to read a book. You can rent or buy a movie, such as a classic film or a comedy. You can buy notepaper in case the patient wants to write letters.

Help the immediate family.

One of the best things you can do to make the cancer patient feel better is to do something for the primary caregiver or the immediate family of the patient. You can do something special for the patient's spouse. For example, buy them a good book to read or bring them food that they enjoy eating. Or simply give them a chance to take a break and be by themselves. Take the patient's children out for ice cream or an afternoon in the park. Take their dog for a walk or clean out the cat's litter pan. Doing something special for the people or pets that the cancer patient cares most about will make the cancer patient feel better.

Don't expect a thank you note.

Make sure that the patient knows that you do not expect a thank-you note for your efforts or even a response to a letter. Tell patients that you would rather have them spend their time and energy on healing themselves rather than responding back to you. Feeling


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compelled to write thank you notes, respond to letters, or call people on the telephone can turn a well-meaning gesture into a chore for the cancer patient.

Know when too much is too much.

Keep telephone calls and visits (whether in the hospital or at home) short unless you are asked to do otherwise. Telephone calls and visits from many people can become very tiring. Keep in mind that sometimes the person may want simply to be left alone for a while.

Share their pain.

Do not be afraid to talk to the patient about their illness. Having cancer is a traumatic experience and attempting to hide the stress and uncomfortableness does not make it go away. Sharing the pain is much better than avoiding the pain. Do not be afraid to ask the patient how they are feeling. Asking implies caring. Not asking implies indifference even if you don't mean it to. Express your concern in words to the patient either through conversations or letters. Even if the patient does not want to express their thoughts or feelings, you can still express your concern to them.

Prayers and healing rituals.

Some friends and relatives feel better by performing healing rituals on their own for the cancer patient. Sending spiritual healing energies through prayer or thoughts can provide comfort to you as well as to the cancer patient.

Provide support, encouragement, and comfort.

Through personal conversations or through writing letters, you can support patients when they need to make critical decisions concerning their treatments and encourage them to continue on the personal heal-

ing path that they have chosen. Keep in mind that you can always provide comfort by simply sending a note that says "I just wanted you to know that I am thinking of you."

Be a good listener.

Sometimes cancer patients simply want someone to listen to them. Try to refrain from giving advice (unless you are asked for it) or attempting to solve the patient's problems. Whether you go to the patient's house to visit them or see them in a store, try just to be a good listener.

Don't forget patients when they appear to be feeling well.

It is important to make an effort to remember patients when they are feeling well. People often receive much extra love and attention when they are ill. They are allowed to sleep more without feeling guilty. They can miss work without being penalized. Often, however, once people start to feel well, all of this extra attention disappears. There is a strong subconscious (and perhaps conscious) message that being sick has its benefits! This is especially important for cancer patients who often will have times of feeling ill and times of feeling well, either from the cancer itself or from the treatments. In addition to helping patients when they feel sick, you can treat them to something special when they are feeling well also.

Financial Help.

Asking for financial help is extremely difficult for anyone whether healthy or not. Do not assume that cancer patients will ask for financial help even if they need it and you have already offered. If you want to offer financial help, then just send a check with a note that indicates that this is what you want to do and that



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it will make you feel better if the person uses the money for something that will help them. If the patient is really against the idea, they can choose not to deposit the check. Most likely, they will use the money wisely and will greatly appreciate the gift.

Conclusion

The needs of the patient and his/her immediate family will change over time. The needs of a newly diagnosed cancer patient are very different from the needs of a recovering patient or the needs of someone who has been undergoing treatment for a long period of time. The type of help and support you can give will change as the patient's physical and emotional conditions change. From time to time, ask the patient or primary caregiver if what you are doing is helpful. Communication is the key to knowing whether or not you are being helpful. Supporting the cancer patient is not an easy task, but it is critically important and valuable for the patient and can be rewarding for the friends and relatives who want to help.


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Thoughts on Living with Cancer Pamphlets

Cancer as a Whole-Body Illness



How to Be an Active Participant in Your Own Recovery:
Guidelines for the Newly Diagnosed Cancer Patient.



Coping with Hair Loss Due to Chemotherapy



Positive Thinking - Helpful or Harmful for Cancer Patients?



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An Introduction to Alternative/Complementary Therapies for Cancer



Being a Parent with Cancer



Diagnosis Cancer: Why Me?



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