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How to greet someone with terminal cancer

Feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, and helplessness come with a cancer diagnosis. For the person who has been diagnosed with cancer, it is helpful when friends and family members provide a comforting presence and practical support. It is often difficult for others to know what to say or start a conversation with someone who has cancer. However, staying in touch is always better than staying away. Here are some tips to help you show your support: Take your cues from the person with cancer. Ask the person with cancer if they would like to talk about the experience. It is best to allow him or her to decide when to talk and how much to share. Show support without words. Your body and facial expressions can also convey your message of care and support. Keep eye contact, listen attentively, and avoid distractions when talking. One important way to provide support is to share some silence without needing to drown it out with chatter. Choose your words carefully. Make sure to acknowledge how difficult this experience is for the person. Carefully choosing what you say can help you show your support without being dismissive or avoiding the topic. For example, it is better to say, "I don't know what to say" than to stop calling or visiting out of fear. Here are some things you can say to help show your care and support: I'm sorry this has happened to you. If you ever feel like talking, I'm here to listen. What are you thinking of doing, and how can I help? I care about you. I'm thinking about you. Here are examples of phrases that are unhelpful: I know just how you feel. I know just what you should do. I know someone who had the exact same diagnosis. I'm sure you'll be fine. Don't worry. How long do you have? Practice active listening. This is a technique that professionals use to show respect. It is a helpful way for you to show that you are connecting to the person's words and feelings. To be an active listener give your full attention, avoid thinking about what to say next, or hurrying the conversation and forcing it to a conclusion. Use caution when asking questions. Phrase your questions carefully and consider the number of questions that you ask in a conversation. People with cancer are often asked many questions by their friends and family members, and it can become tiresome. Make sure it is okay to give advice. Before you offer any advice, ask if it is okay and be prepared to stop if you are not encouraged to continue. If you feel prompted to make a suggestion, ask for the person's permission to share it before proceeding. Unsolicited advice may cause unnecessary stress. Be honest about your feelings but do not overburden. Communicate feelings you may be experiencing—such as fear, anxiety, anger, or disbelief — in response to the person's cancer diagnosis. But try to be brief in your explanations. Spending too much time expressing difficult emotions you are feeling may overwhelm and upset the person with cancer. If you struggle to maintain your composure, give yourself some time away to calm your feelings before talking again. You may find that meeting with a counselor helps you process and manage your emotions. Talk about topics other than cancer. Talking about usual topics may help provide a sense of balance. The intent is not to distract your friend or family member, but to help him or her maintain usual interests and connections and take a break from difficult conversations. Encourage the person to stay involved. Help your friend or family member decide how to stay involved in his or her typical activities and continue old routines. Those steps help many people with cancer cope during a time that includes many unfamiliar experiences. However, a lack of time or energy from cancer or its treatment may prevent some people from usual activities and routines. You may be able to help your friend or family member prioritize the activities they want to do and delegate other tasks. For example, you can suggest that your friend or family member saves energy to attend his or her child's soccer game or school play while asking for volunteers to help with household chores. Ask if practical support would be helpful. Offer specific examples of ways you could help during cancer treatment. Ask if those suggestions sound helpful. Ideas include running errands, caring for pets, driving the person to an appointment, or picking up children from school. This approach is better than saying, "Let me know if you need any help," because some people have a hard time asking for help. If many friends and family members volunteer to help, you may offer to coordinate everyone's efforts. Some online communities provide tools to help manage everyone's involvement. Related Resources Supporting a Friend Who Has Cancer Talking With Your Spouse or Partner What You Can Say to Someone With Cancer During and After Treatment Finding Support and Information Receiving a terminal diagnosis is a traumatic experience. However, the well-intentioned and "reassuring" things that people say can be equally distressing. The truth is that many of us just don't know the right words to comfort someone who is dying.How to Talk to Someone Who Is Dying"Most of the time, I really liked when people said nothing," notes Michelle Colon-Johnson, who has been diagnosed with stage four cancer five times and survived. "If I wanted to discuss my diagnosis, it felt good to know I had people I could talk to, but I never wanted to be treated differently."Anticipatory grief is a difficult process experienced by friends and relatives as well as the individual who is terminally ill. Experts who assist patients in their final days say the best thing to do for someone who has received news of their prognosis is to allow them to guide your conversations and actions."They might not want to talk," explains Edie McCaddin, LICSW, MSW, ACSW, a social worker with 20 years of experience working with hospice patients and their families.McCaddin says it's important to respect the patient's wishes but let them know you're willing to hear their thoughts, hopes and fears whenever they are ready. Meredith Cinman, LCSW, MBA, adds that loved ones should try not to worry about saying "the right thing" and focus on spending more time truly listening to the patient instead.Browse Our Free Senior Care GuidesWhat NOT to Say to Someone Who Is Dying"Avoid clichés or platitudes," notes psychiatrist and author Dr. Marcia Sirota. "Saying things like, 'Everything happens for a reason,' and, 'It's God's will,' can make the person feel like their illness is their fault."Remarks like "You're strong" and "You'll get through this" are equally problematic. Although it can be tempting to reassure a patient that they will be okay, this approach can be hurtful. Not only do these statements dismiss their feelings and concerns, but they can also seem empty and insensitive. The truth is that they will probably not "get through this" in the usual sense, because they are terminally ill."Maybe they don't feel strong right now and need to feel like they can be afraid," Dr. Sirota adds. "You need to give them the space they need to share their fears and come to terms with them."How to Comfort Someone Who Is DyingDr. Sirota's advice to family members and friends is to give your loved one as much emotional support as they need and be aware that this doesn't always have to come in a verbal format. Use actions to make their remaining days as easy and comfortable as possible."In this respect," Dr. Sirota says, "don't wait for the patient to ask for help because they might be too overwhelmed to do so."Come up with thoughtful gestures that would be both practical and meaningful to them, and then see these things through. Prepare and deliver dinner, offer to clean the house, run errands, or drive them to doctor's appointments. If you say you are going to do something, be sure to follow through and do it. If you aren't sure you will be able to deliver, it's best not to make any commitments."The greatest gift you can give is your time and attention," stresses Nancy Sherman, LICSW, an end-of-life and grief professional. "If you live close enough, you have the opportunity to demonstrate your support by being there."During visits, rent a movie and make popcorn, play games, or just sit quietly with them. If faith is important to the patient, consider praying or reading the Bible together. If you're unable to visit in person, stay in touch through emails, phone calls, video chats, notes and cards. Sherman explains that these actions say, "I'm willing to walk this difficult road with you, regardless of what that entails." "Use this time to tell your friend or relative how much you love them," she adds. That could be recalling funny stories or important moments in your relationship. The goal is to make sure nothing is left unsaid. A terminally ill individual may not always feel like talking, though. In these cases, notes and emails are helpful for communicating your feelings and messages of support without your loved one feeling pressure to chat or respond immediately. Let them know they are in your thoughts and that you are available to talk whenever they feel the need.Facing the Reality of a Loved One's Final DaysIf you are close enough with this person to discuss end-of-life care and final arrangements, it is important to broach these topics early on. The conversation may be uncomfortable initially, but talking about details and preferences will assure your loved one that their wishes will be carried out. This discussion will also provide you with clear instructions to follow both before and after their passing.It may seem morbid to some, but end-of-life conversations can help both parties come to terms with the situation and segue to other poignant discussions. When Mercia Tapping's husband was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, they talked openly about his impending death."We faced his disease head on," she recalls. After a two-year battle, her husband passed away at home, as he had requested. "We had discussed all aspects of his burial and funeral. He wanted me to deliver his eulogy, and I did. Because we faced this so openly together, I have no regrets. Nothing was left unsaid or undone, which makes his death painful but complete."Katrina Kritz is dealing with a similar situation as she watches her mother's congestive heart failure progress."In a situation like this, there is nothing to say except 'I love you,'" Kritz admits. "I tell my mother all the things that I never had the time to tell her before. I hold her hand and stroke her hair and massage her feet. I can't imagine what she feels or what her thoughts are, so I just love her by being beside her and comforting her the best way I know how."Letting someone know how much they are loved, listening to them and offering a hand to hold are perhaps the three greatest gifts you can give to someone who is facing the end of life."We must talk about our fears, wishes, joys, and regrets and be able to accept and forgive before we end our time on this planet," encourages Paula Shaw, CDAC, DCEP, a grief counselor with more than 21 years of experience. "Anyone who helps us do this is a gift."

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