

What not to say (and say) when someone has cancer

Family or friends may not know what to say when told about a cancer diagnosis. Every person is different and may have different needs. The following suggestions are based on common experiences and may help in understanding what you say may not be what a person with cancer is hearing and thinking.

What not to say

If you say: “You are lucky, that’s a good cancer to have.”

The person with cancer may think: “Please don’t tell me how lucky I am.” There are no good cancers. There are definitely some which respond better to treatment than others.

If you say: “Cancer isn’t as hard as it used to be.”

The person with cancer may think: “Unfortunately, it felt pretty tough this morning when I was lying on the bathroom floor crying over a bowel movement.” You don’t actually know how hard it is for everyone with cancer. Please check out your assumptions.

If you say: “I’ve always wanted to shave my head.”

The person with cancer may think: “Losing my hair to chemo is not the same as shaving my head.” Body image is an important part in how people with cancer feel about themselves.

If you say: “I didn’t think you’d be up for it.”

The person with cancer may think: “Just ask me, please don’t assume.” Keep offering invitations, sometimes people won’t be up to it, but sometimes they will, and may desperately need to get out of the house.

If you say: “You’re so brave.”

The person with cancer may think: “I know you mean well, but I don’t feel brave right now.” Bravery is something that happens when people choose to take on something scary. Looking on the outside is often not the same as how a person is actually feeling on the inside.

If you say: “Have you tried...?” (making suggestions about treatments)

The person with cancer may think: “Yes, things like eating more kiwis may be an effective way of combating constipation in everyday life, but if the industrial-strength medical-grade laxatives a doctor has prescribed aren’t working, then adding more fruit probably won’t either.” Unless you have a really important piece of advice, that people with cancer can’t live without, please don’t make suggestions about cancer treatments.

If you say: “If anyone can beat this, you can”.

The person with cancer may think: “I know you mean well but when you say this I feel like if I die or get really sick from cancer, I didn’t fight hard enough.”

If you say: “Remember, there’s always someone worse off than you.”

The person with cancer may think: “How do you know this is true?” They may feel so guilty and stop talking about their thoughts and feelings.

If you say: “I know how you feel.”

The person with cancer may think: “No, you don’t.” Everyone’s experience is different. Do not make comparisons to someone else. A kind and caring word can go a long way.

If you say: “At least you’ll have loads of free time now.”

The person with cancer may think: “I am NOT on holiday”. Taking time off work to deal with cancer is a full-time job and impacts every part of living life.

If you say: “Congratulations! You’re done!”

The person with cancer may think: “My cancer is not necessarily over just because I’ve had my last scheduled bit of chemo or radiation.” Reaching the end of treatment can be a really scary time, let people with cancer tell you when they are ready to celebrate. Finishing treatment can trigger worries about next steps or the cancer coming back.

What to say

What you can say: “I don’t really know what to say ... do you want to talk about it?”

The person with cancer may think: “It’s okay to be honest with me about how you are feeling and asking me how I feel” It is not necessary to be an expert in dealing with this really tough situation, just listen with compassion and care.

What you can say: “I’m so sorry you’re going through this difficult time.”

The person with cancer may think: “Thanks for understanding that things are really hard right now”.

What you can say: “Do you need ... a lift home from chemo?”

The person with cancer may think: “Thanks for being specific in your offer of help and I hope you can follow through with what you say.” Suggestions are more helpful than general “I’m here if you need me” type statements. They may actually take you up on offers which can genuinely make a difference.”

Accessed and adapted from

- <https://www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/cancer-chat/thread/12-things-never-to-say-to-someone-who-has-cancer>

More websites

- <https://www.cancer.net/coping-with-cancer/talking-with-family-and-friends/supporting-friend-who-has-cancer>
- <https://www.nm.org/healthbeat/healthy-tips/the-best-and-worst-ways-to-support-a-friend-with-cancer>