



How You Can Help a Seriously Ill Friend

When a friend is seriously ill, what are some practical things that well-wishers can do? It's a question that many of us struggle to answer. We sought advice from a group of experts on the topic—the Anderson Network, an organization of cancer survivors who volunteer their support for cancer patients and caregivers.

Here is a small sample of the suggestions offered by Network members:

Listen—really listen—to the patient. Over and over again, Network members told us this: “It is really important for a patient to be able to tell others how they are feeling without being fearful. Friends who can listen and not feel sorry for the patient are wonderful,” one wrote. Sometimes patients don't want to overwhelm their spouses or immediate family with their fears and concerns, and a good friend can “reassure the person that you will be there for them whenever they feel a need to just have a good cry.”

“Don't feel that you have to ‘make it all right,’” wrote another. “Sometimes patients are so overwhelmed by the circumstances that they just need to talk or vent about the situation.” Another advised, “Let a patient know that it is OK to feel fear, anger, sadness, or whatever.”

Offer help with day-to-day needs. This could include bringing dinner or other food to the patient's family, doing yard work, cleaning the house, walking the dog, picking up prescriptions at the drug store, taking out the trash, or driving the patient to a doctor's appointment. Ask if you can write a letter, make a phone call, send an e-mail, or help with unfinished business. Several Network members said they appreciated a well-wisher's help in gathering information about their illness. “My sister-in-law,” wrote one, “was our research

department, untiringly Google-ing information about the disease and treatment options.”

You can also offer to give the patient's caretaker a break, perhaps by sitting with the patient while the caretaker has a shower or goes out for a meal. Remember the patient's children, too. Perhaps you could baby-sit, take the children for a fun outing, help them with school assignments, or drive them to the hospital for a visit.

If you offer food, you don't have to make it yourself. Several Network members said they appreciated receiving gift cards to restaurants as well as store-prepared cookies, cake, crackers, cheese, deli meat, and fruit.

Be specific. “Don't tell the caretaker, ‘Call me if you need help.’ Try saying something like, ‘Tell me the daily routine for the kids so I can determine what part of it I can take over,’” a Network member advised. Another said that after her own experience in the hospital, “I vowed that if one of my friends was really ill, I would call the family on Sunday night and ask, ‘What's on the agenda this week, and how can I help?’”

Better yet, organize a group of helpers. One Network member said that everyone in her daughter's office signed up to bring the family a meal on a specific night. A neighborhood group designated a “point person” to schedule help—preparing meals, running errands, giving rides—for another patient. “My best advice,” another Network member wrote, “is to help the person or their family get organized. A book such as *Share the Care* or a Website such as www.lotsahelpinghands.com can help people set up care teams. The coordinators can figure out what needs to be done and then distribute those needs among a group of people.”

Call before you visit. While Network members appreciated others' support and good wishes, several said there

were days when they were too ill or tired for visitors or when they could tolerate only short visits.

Be positive. “Help us laugh and take our minds off of our illness,” one Network member wrote. Never tell stories about people who died recently from the same disease. “Gifts of inspirational books by folks who survived their illness and other impossible odds were a source of great encouragement,” another Network member said. Others said they found encouraging cards and handwritten notes especially comforting.

Remember they're more than patients. Treat an ill friend normally, the way you always have, Network members said. Don't act like he or she “has the plague.” A sick person, another wrote, “is the same person he or she was before the diagnosis.”

Stay in touch. Remember that a serious illness can be a long battle. Stick with patients for the long haul, not just when they're first diagnosed. Seven years into her battle with breast cancer, one Network member wrote, only one support group continues to send her cards and notes of encouragement on a regular basis. “I am always looking for people to appreciate the mental toughness it takes to deal with cancer,” another member wrote. “It is a tough fight and one I will relentlessly keep on fighting.” ●

An expanded version of this House Call is available online at www.mdanderson.org/oncolog.

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