

"How do I help someone...

... cope with cancer?



Cancer is very common. It can come to any person, no matter what age or whether male or female. What are some of the things we have to think about if we are diagnosed with it ourselves, or if our family or friends are diagnosed?

An important element of cancer for a helper (as well as the person with the illness) is to understand as much as you can about the both the illness and its effect on the person's life and those around him or her.

Leading up to diagnosis

It is probable that you, or your friend or family member, has symptoms of some kind. These can come in many ways.

The best things to do is not to hesitate. [See, or encourage your friend or family member, to see a medical practitioner and discuss the symptoms with him or her.](#) The worst thing to do is carry out a Google search and self-diagnose! A search on Google can be very helpful when diagnosis has been made, as long as the information is found on an

authentic government, medical or support group site, but in the first instance, the diagnosis of a doctor is paramount. There should be no delay seeking diagnosis. Sometimes people do put off seeking advice for a variety of reasons, including "it's nothing much", or "it's not convenient – I'll just wait until after ...". Sometimes men, for example, wait before seeing their doctor about symptoms of prostate cancer. The thought of the tests for diagnosis, or the nature of the illness itself, can be embarrassing for them. A problem with this is that if the illness is present, the symptoms can become worse. Eventually, a doctor has to be seen and treatment determined. Why not do it early before the problem becomes more serious and less curable?

✚ [Pray about getting the diagnosis!](#)

The illness

Any cancer is serious. Sometimes when it is diagnosed it is seen as being very serious, even though the symptoms may not have been too prominent. A lump in the breast, and small skin 'patch' (a possible melanoma) may not be very noticeable. But, let the doctor decide.

It is important to remember that while cancer used to be regarded with great dread (the big "C"), on the whole, it is no longer what was earlier termed a 'death sentence'. It can still be very serious, but the development of more focused drugs used in chemotherapy, and more accurate radiotherapy, and advancement in surgical techniques, can have an important role in reducing if not clearing the cancer. In my own case, the specialist surgeon said to me on diagnosis, "You have a high-grade cancer, but we'll fix it!" And fix it he did – undoubtedly with the help of my Heavenly Father.

✚ [Pray about coping with the illness itself!](#)

Life-changing experience

Having cancer can be a life-changing experience for the person with it and his or her family and friends. Some of the things that can happen are:

- You begin to wonder whether you or they are going to live.
- Medical terms are used that you do not understand.
- You cannot do the things you used to enjoy.
- Your normal routine is disrupted.
- You can feel helpless and lonely.

Some emotions are anger, frustration, panic and anxiety. These are ‘normal’ experiences; they do not necessarily reflect on a person’s Christian love. It is important that as caregivers, we understand the person with cancer and **do not judge them**.

The treatment

Treatment of cancers varies enormously. By and large, they are all, associated with pain of different degrees. The smaller, more superficial cancers are often treated with less invasive, less long-term painful surgery. More serious cancers requiring lengthy treatment can have a major impact on the person with the illness, and friends and families. Cancer and treatment can affect everyone associated with the illness.

✚ Pray during the treatment.

‘Do’s’ for someone who cares

Much love, care, understanding and help is necessary all the time. I’m not sure what the most important of these attributes is. The truth probably is that they integrate with one another. Understanding the reduced ability of a person with the illness is certainly vital. The person may not feel like doing the things they normally do – and with good reason. Their appearance may change – hair loss during chemo, loss of interest and ability in sexual relations in prostate cancer (or other forms of cancer – for that matter) can certainly affect a husband/wife relationship. Shortness of tolerance is not uncommon and can lead to hurt. For the carer (everyone who has contact with the ill person!) it is important to learn more tolerance at all stages of the person’s treatment.

Life during cancer treatment, like many illnesses, is usually an emotional roller-coaster. Understanding the oftentimes wild swings in moods is important in helping the ill person. Sometimes emotion is a big high (after some good treatment news) and many times a big low due to diagnosis, pain, or bad news during treatment. An emotional high can lead to laughter, but, a low, more often than not, can lead to tears. (Yes, gentlemen, it’s ok. Tears are not just the prerogative of ladies!) And often, the ‘ride’ comes over a little thing. The trivial cause of an outburst can be unbelievable to the carer but is nonetheless ‘important’ to the ill person.

✚ Pray that you will be guided to use the most helpful words.

‘Don’ts’ for someone who cares

Often when a person is undergoing treatment, they will have tests that can be scans, x-rays or pathology. It is not helpful to tell someone who is having these tests to say beforehand, “You’ll be OK. You’ll get through it OK!” For that matter, it is never useful to say this at any time during a cancer program simply because we do not know. The reason for having a check is to determine whether the person will be OK or not. Sometimes, a scan or test will show a deterioration in the condition or tumour growth. If we have said, “You’ll be OK”, then we are providing a false sense of hope and security.

It is not always helpful to be effusive in our praise of how a person seems, especially if they seem to handle everything well. The result of our praise might actually hinder the person with the illness. We might say, “Oh, you are doing so well; you look good; you have such a wonderful spirit!”, when, in fact, they are feeling and looking terrible. Some encouragement rarely goes astray but, in moderation. Perhaps, “You seem to be doing OK, how do you feel?”.

In this way, we shift the focus from our perception to finding out the true feeling of the person for whom we are caring.

✚ Pray that you will be guided to do the most useful things.

The role of faith

As in all illnesses (and for that matter – life) God will be with you if you place your trust in Him. If you haven't already, read through the section on Faith and Illness. It should help you understand the role faith can have in your life. (You might like to refer to the following article on this site: <https://www.adelphicare.org/HDIHS/PDF/000H-faith.pdf>)

Caring for yourself

Self-care is an important aspect of doing something for others. We need to be in a good space personally to help a person cope with cancer. This will mean constant prayer and awareness of those around us.

✚ Pray

Being positive

It is well-acknowledged that having a positive attitude at all times during the cancer experience can be of benefit in life during illness. It can assist in both coping and recovery.



A very useful website to help in our understanding is:

<https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer>

It has a special section on children's cancer:

<https://www.cancer.gov/publications/patient-education/guide-for-parents>

This is an official cancer website of the United States Government. It has most useful information that helps our understanding of the illness. If we can couple this with our recognition of the way God can help us, we will be better equipped to care.

