

How do I talk about cancer?

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A cancer diagnosis can be scary, both for the person with the diagnosis and for their loved ones. When someone we care about tells us they have cancer, it can be hard to know what to say.



Ask about cancer

You can use the word "cancer." Sometimes people avoid bringing up cancer or treatment because they worry it will be awkward, they won't know what to say, or it will make their loved one sad. While they might not always feel like talking about it, it is much better to ask than to not deal with the subject at all.



Avoid "toxic positivity"

"Toxic positivity" is when we try to put a positive spin on something that is hard, painful, or sad. While it is normal to want to cheer up loved ones, it is important to support them through all of their emotions. Try saying "that sounds hard/painful" instead of "just think good thoughts/be positive" or "others have it worse." It is okay to not be okay!



Focus on the NOW

by asking "How are you doing today?" Treatment can be overwhelming to think about in terms of months or years. Help them stay focused on the present moment.

Offer specific help

Rather than asking what a person needs, give them suggestions, like offering a ride, dropping off a meal, or going with them to an appointment.



Continue checking in

Keep checking in after treatment is over. Even when a person looks like themselves again or appears well, they may still feel sick, sad, or pain.



Be careful using metaphors

Sometimes cancer is described as a "battle" someone is fighting. This metaphor may help some people feel strong, but not everyone views cancer this way. Ask open-ended questions and use the same language your loved one does to talk about their cancer and cancer treatment.



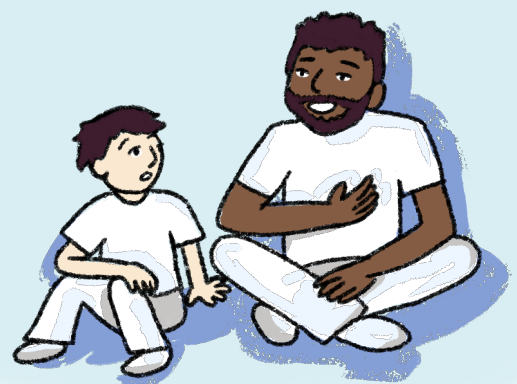
Address fears of dying with empathy

A cancer diagnosis might make us worry about dying. If a loved one tells you they are worried, an honest response such as "I know you are worried. I am too" is more supportive than "we are all going to die one day" or "you are going to be fine."



Explain cancer in an age-appropriate way

Talk to kids, teens, and young adults about cancer in a way that is appropriate for their age. Children are great at picking up on what is happening around them, even if they do not fully understand it. Keep the information simple and clear.



It is okay to not have all the answers or say the perfect thing. Being there for your loved one with your words and actions is powerful. Be sure to balance taking care of your loved one with taking care of yourself.

Here are more helpful resources:

<https://www.uchicagomedicine.org/cancer/patient-care/resources-support/supportive-oncology>

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/caregivers/caregiver-resource-guide.html>

<https://www.cancersupportcommunity.org/family-and-friends>



Section of Hematology/Oncology