How to Support Your Loved One Diagnosed with Cancer
By Leslie Becker-Phelps, PhD

When someone you love is diagnosed with cancer, you can feel like you've received the diagnosis, too. In a sense, that's true. You have received a “diagnosis” of being a person whose loved one has cancer. This comes with its own kind of pain – especially as you watch that loved one struggling. Sometimes it is difficult simply because you empathize with their pain and feel powerless to help them feel better. At other times, your feelings are more complicated. Your empathy can become contaminated by anger over the person’s poor choices that created problems for them, such as smoking or spending too much time in the sun. In both cases, you might feel at a loss for how to respond.

The greatest danger in these situations is that your sense of helplessness can overtake your thinking. You might insist that the person agree to a particular treatment, such as chemotherapy or surgery. This might, in theory, be the best possible advice, but reality has other important factors, such as whether the person is ready to hear it. If they’re not, then your advice won’t help. It may even backfire by making the person angry and intent on proving you wrong, or just distancing from you (making them feel more alone and you more upset).

So, when faced with this situation, you will do best to follow these four steps:

Be there. Your loved one might just want someone to be there with them. So, at these times, the greatest service you can offer them is to be physically and emotionally present.

Listen. Don’t give your opinion or advise. Also, don’t try to make the pain go away – at least, not as an initial response. Instead, let your loved one know that you want to hear them out – all of their thoughts and feelings. Also, ask questions so that you can fully understand their struggles.

Show compassion. Verbally express your understanding, give a hug, or send a card. While you don’t want to fall apart in their presence – requiring them to take care of you, you do want to let your caring show on your face. Follow up on conversations to let the person know you are concerned. Also follow up with helpful actions.
instance, a friend who is going through chemotherapy might appreciate you sometimes preparing dinner for their family.

*When asked, offer your opinion.* People often just want a sounding board as they work through their struggles, so resist the temptation to solve their problems. But, if they ask for advice or indicate that they are open to it, feel free to share your suggestions, just don't hand them out as directives.

Helping a loved one at difficult times like this takes a commitment to caring. By being present, truly listening, and being supportive, you are offering one of the greatest gifts possible.

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