

Questions to consider

What can I do?

Are there other family or friends who can help?

Are there any language, cultural, gender or religious differences I need to consider when offering help?

Your help will be appreciated so long as it is not overbearing and the person with cancer has control.

You will be able to obtain books to help you understand what your relative or friend is going through from local libraries or your local Cancer Society.

The Cancer Society

The Cancer Society of New Zealand offers information and support services to people with cancer and their families. Printed materials on specific cancers, treatments and diet are available.

The Cancer Society is a major funder of cancer research in New Zealand. The aim of research is to determine the causes, prevention, and effective methods of treating various types of cancer.

The Society also undertakes health promotion through programmes such as the melanoma awareness campaign and the Fit Food campaign.

The Cancer Society of New Zealand is a non-profit organisation which receives no direct financial support from Government. Funding comes only from donations, legacies and bequests.

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We would appreciate your support

Donations can be made by phoning 0900 31 111, through our website or by contacting your local Cancer Society.



Cancer
Society

When someone has cancer



When someone has cancer

Try to listen carefully to what your relative or friend says so you can understand what he or she wants and needs. This is probably the most important thing you can do. As well, offer your support for when it might be needed.

You may be feeling quite worried at hearing that your relative or friend has cancer. This is quite usual, but if you are not careful it may change the way you relate to your relative or friend.

Try to overcome your fears and treat your relative or friend normally. Remember they are still the same person but they now need extra support, especially during their periods of medical treatment and hospital stays.

You may be important in helping make life as normal as possible in a world that has been turned topsy turvey.

Acknowledge the illness

Your relative or friend may be frightened by the diagnosis, or may feel lonely, angry or depressed. How you react can make a big difference in the way they cope. Support their family too. They will need an understanding listener.

The first time you see them after hearing about the cancer is often the most difficult. Don't ignore the illness. Acknowledge it and let them talk about their concerns if they want to. You may find it helps you be more understanding if you know a little about the type of cancer and the treatment involved.

Do friendly things

Ring regularly, visit in your usual routine and, if appropriate, drop in unexpectedly. Be aware of the person's wants and if they prefer you not to do some of the things you think are helpful don't be offended. Find out how you can help with extra everyday things that may have become difficult for the person because of treatment and its after-effects.

Send or take flowers or plants. Their colours, greenery and fragrance bring lots of pleasure. If it's possible, take your relative or friend out to lunch or dinner.

If you don't live close by, send a card or even better a letter. Mail is important to people in hospital or unwell at home. Write regularly even if you don't receive a prompt reply your letters will help keep your relative or friend in contact with the outside world, but remember to be sensitive. Your relative or friend may be worried about the future so be careful and select events they can relate to. They may not want to know about your marvellous holiday plans when activities like that are not possible for them in the immediate future.

Practical help

For a while your relative or friend may not be able to go out to work. They may also find it difficult to care for themselves or their family in the usual way. There are many ways in which you and other support people could help with everyday activities.

It is better to make a specific offer to help rather than just asking, "May I help?"

You could offer to:

- do the ironing,
- mow the lawn

- baby-sit, or take children to school, sporting or hobby activities,
- prepare meals,
- take the patient for treatment, to the shops, to the library, and later, to work.

If your relative or friend is well enough, offer to go with them for a walk or for a drive. If they are normally involved in clubs, sport, night classes or children's activities, help them to keep these up if they want to.

Emotional support

People with cancer often have high and low mood swings. It can take several months to adjust to a diagnosis of cancer, so be prepared for changes in their behaviour.

They may swing from happiness, through sadness, or frustration to anger. They may get very tired and sometimes as a result of medical treatment they may have little control over their feelings.

Listening well is not as easy as we often assume, but it is very important. Your relative or friend may need to talk. They may have questions for which you have no answers and what they say may bring to light problems you didn't know about. You or someone else may be able to help resolve these problems.

Talking is as important as listening. Your relative or friend may need to discuss what is happening to them now and their concern about the future.

Try to listen carefully and observe your relative or friend carefully so you can think of their needs first. Encourage them to talk about interests they enjoy, especially if they seem to be dwelling on their illness.