

GUIDANCE FOR PEER SUPPORT VOLUNTEERS

Thank you for volunteering your time to help those who are dealing with cancer. We hope the suggestions included in this document will be of assistance to you.

AREAS OF DIVERSITY TO KEEP IN MIND

Age	Economic Status	Religion/Spiritual Belief
Race	Education	Political Affiliation
Gender	Language	Insurance Status
Sexual Orientation	Culture/Ethnicity	Marital Status

Your opinions, feelings and circumstances may vary greatly from the people you are helping. It is our job to meet people where they are and not try to convince or influence them to be or feel otherwise. Men may approach support quite differently from women. Different cultural groups may have certain beliefs that contradict your own. Be mindful not to assume anything about the other person and/or their family.

PSYCHOSOCIAL ISSUES

When working with people with cancer and their loved ones, it is helpful to keep in mind what they may be dealing with. One or more of the following may be affecting the people who contact you for support:

Depression	Anxiety	Fear	Anger
Guilt/Shame/Blame	Isolation	Stigma	Financial Difficulties
Disability	Pain	Loss of Job	Divorce or Break-up of Relationship
Loss of Friendships	Loss of Home		

If listening to someone with the above issues feels out of your comfort zone, do not hesitate to seek help and support from your organization. Talking with other volunteers can provide valuable insight – sharing experiences, **without breaking confidentiality**, can offer different options, perspectives and techniques.

SUGGESTIONS FROM CANCER PATIENTS AND SURVIVORS

- Avoid imposing how you think the cancer patient appears (e.g., “You look great!”). Feelings are heightened during the cancer experience and people may be very sensitive about their appearance.
- Avoid comparing cancer patients to other cancer patients.
- Resist sharing personal stories of people who have died from cancer or those who have “miraculously” survived.
- Always respect CONFIDENTIALITY.

SUGGESTIONS FROM SUPPORT VOLUNTEERS

- Realize that you will make mistakes – don’t be afraid to apologize for hurting someone’s feelings and don’t think you are the first or only one who has done so. The work can be very challenging and we are just as human as the people we are helping. Mistakes are our greatest teachers!
- Remember that your value is not as a medical advisor or mental health professional – your desire to help and support another human being is what is valued by the client and the cancer support organization.
- Be yourself! Your unique personality and style will come through and make the connection with the client special.

The greatest benefit you will give to someone else is to be fully present with them and to *Listen Actively*: The art of active listening has been described as listening with our mouths closed and our hearts open.

TIPS FOR ACTIVE LISTENING

- Take time to establish a comfort level and connection with the other person.
- Adjust to the pace of the person speaking –you may need to slow down, do not rush or interrupt.
- Silence is OK! No need to fill in when there is a pause – people are often digesting thoughts, ideas and feelings.
- Realize you cannot fix or cure someone else’s situation, but giving your time and attention can be very helpful.

- Do your best to not take the other person’s emotions personally. Having a life-threatening illness is overwhelming and sometimes people may cover up their fear with anger, hostility, inappropriate laughter, denial, etc.
- No need to try to be an expert – even if you have had the same type of cancer as the other person, their experience may be quite different from your own.
- Avoid minimizing the type of cancer by implying that one cancer is “not as bad” as another type of cancer.
- Share experiences rather than giving advice – medical or otherwise. The other person is always responsible for making their own choices.

- Avoid recommending any specific medical professionals and do not criticize any medical professionals or medical establishments.
- Ask permission before asking personal questions of the other person.
- Be patient – keep in mind that the other person may be in crisis and not thinking or speaking as clearly as usual.
- Take your cues from the other person – it is not your job to cheer people up, encourage them to fight the cancer, etc. Help the person to focus on *Being*, not *Doing*.

- Sharing a laugh can be a welcome change of pace – again, let the other person take the lead.
- Be supportive of the individual’s treatment decision (including the decision to decline treatment), even if you think or feel very differently.
- Avoid questions or comments that could be interpreted as blaming or punishing (e.g., “Did you smoke?”).
- Be sincere, genuine and honest – people can tell!

- Avoid saying, “I know how you feel,” because no one really knows how another person feels.
- Regard the individual as a whole person – she/he is more than their cancer. Be flexible and allow the person to focus on whatever aspect of their life that they choose to talk about.

You may be dealing with caregivers or other loved ones of the person with cancer. Caregivers are likely to be under tremendous physical, emotional and possibly financial strain, so the same active listening skills apply.

If you are volunteering with an organization that offers practical support to patients, caregivers or other family members, be specific regarding what types of assistance the organization is able to provide (e.g., shopping, errands, house cleaning, cooking, etc.).

Keep in mind the responsibilities and obligations in your own life and be careful not to overextend yourself. Burnout can be a real “occupational hazard” in this type of work, so setting reasonable and realistic boundaries at the very beginning can actually help to keep you going in an effective way.

Check in with your own feelings – is the other person “pushing your buttons”? Are you making any judgments about the other person? Make sure that you have some support in place for yourself so that you are able to remain supportive of the person you are helping; or, you may want to let someone in the organization know that you would rather not continue with the relationship.



Remember: Your compassionate presence is more powerful than anything you could say or do.

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