

10 THINGS TO NEVER SAY TO SOMEONE WITH CANCER

When someone you know is diagnosed with cancer, it's easy to become tongue-tied. You want to say the right thing, but what if it comes out wrong. While everyone's experience with cancer is unique, follow this advice on what statements to avoid and what to say instead.

Don't say: "I can't stop crying. I was up all night worrying about you."

It's important to not take over the person's emotional roller-coaster. "Remember, the person who has the cancer has the cancer," says Marleen Meyers, MD, a medical oncologist and director of the survivorship program at the Laura and Isaac Perlmutter Cancer Center at NYU Langone Medical Center. First and foremost, the cancer patient needs to take care of themselves and not worry about you at this time.

What to say instead: "I feel terrible you're going through this. Feel free to cry with me, to talk, or not to talk. I'll take my lead from you."

Don't say: "Just be grateful you don't have (insert another form of) cancer."

No matter what type of cancer you have and no matter the stage, it's a life-altering diagnosis—even if it's not immediately life threatening, shares Ann Pietrangelo, a 4-year cancer survivor and author of *Catch That Look: Living, Laughing & Loving Despite Triple-Negative Breast Cancer*. "You don't need to be reminded that things can always be worse. Comparing cancers is not helpful."

What to say instead: "Tell me about your (whatever type) cancer, if you'd like. I'd like to know more about what you're going through."

Don't say: "You're so strong."

People diagnosed with cancer are bombarded with warrior imagery all the time such as 'fighters,' 'warriors,' 'win the battle.' This imagery may help some people feel more in control of their experience, but it can also make you feel like you're doing it all wrong if you're having a bad day." Having others tell you "you're so strong," can sometimes make you feel like you can't or shouldn't show any vulnerability.

What to say instead: "I admire how you're handling this with such grace." Grace doesn't imply that the cancer survivor is strong or weak. It leaves the door open for the survivor to have good days and bad days.

Don't say: "Are you a smoker?"

"It is true that certain health behaviors increase the chances of being diagnosed with cancer, but now is not the time to place blame. People who are diagnosed will often agonize about why they got the disease, and being asked about their health habits only rubs salt in the wound. It is important to remember that there are many things that can contribute to a cancer diagnosis: genetics, environment, health behaviors.

What to say instead: "You don't deserve this," or "I'm so sorry this is happening to you."

Don't say: "My friend had the same cancer that you have. Let me tell you all about it."

"Patients with cancer do not always want to know stories about a friend, relative, or a co-worker, especially if something bad happened, such as a reoccurrence or a complication," says Randy Stevens, MD, director of radiation oncology at White Plains Hospital in New York.

What to say instead: "I think my friend had the same cancer. I know everyone's cancer is different, but would you like me to put you in touch with her?"

Don't say: "If there's anything I can do, just let me know."

It sounds kind, but here's why it's not so great: "This just gives the person the homework of figuring out what you can do to help, then the burden of having to ask," says Jennifer Glass, a writer and speaker who was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer in 2013.

What to say instead: Be specific, with as few decision points or action items as possible for the person. For example: "I'm going to make a meal for your family next week. What day would be good? Let me know if there's anything you don't eat."

Don't say: "I know how you feel."

Often times people use 'I know how you feel' to try and express their empathy. But the truth of the matter is, you don't know how he feels.

What to say instead: "I can't imagine how you feel." Your honesty and vulnerability to admit that this is new territory for you will open the door to communication—and your openness may encourage your friend to tell you exactly how he feels.

Don't say: "I've heard that they can cure leukemia with modified AIDS virus cells now..."

Breakthrough treatments may be in the news, but they're tough to actually receive unless you are in a trial. And only their doctors will know if they are eligible for one.

What to say instead: Ask questions, like "Are you feeling good about your treatment? Are there any new medications or techniques that could be helpful?" Speak to the reality that the patient is facing.

Don't say: Nothing.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a cancer patient who would rather have a friend not reach out at all than say the wrong thing. Simply put, don't ignore the person. A lot of people are afraid and don't know what to say, but ignoring someone can make her feel isolated or alone. You're much better off saying something.

What to say instead: That you aren't sure what to say, but you're there for her—whether she wants to discuss it, cry about it, or forget about all about it for a while.

By Melissa Fiorenza, April 24, 2015 <http://www.prevention.com/sex/cancer-support>

