

Think Before You Speak

A prostate cancer survivor offers his thoughts on what people should – and shouldn't – say to someone who recently received a diagnosis of cancer.

By Robert Heywood

Robert Heywood is a lawyer who works exclusively as a mediator in complex injury cases. He lives and works in Oakland, California. Heywood discovered he had cancer after he saw his family physician about leg pain and asked for a prostate exam; that led to a biopsy by a urologic oncologist and diagnosis of metastatic prostate cancer. His article was prompted by a question asked at a session hosted by Cancer Support Community in Walnut Creek, California.

YOU HEAR FROM SOMEONE that a mutual friend just received a diagnosis of cancer and is beginning treatment. You want to say or do something but are unsure how to proceed. The idea of cancer makes you uncomfortable, and you wonder if it's best to not do anything. Nevertheless, you eventually decide to reach out but still aren't sure how to approach the situation. What do you do?

As a patient with metastatic prostate cancer diagnosed three years ago, here are my thoughts.

Let's start with a couple of don'ts:

Don't say "I know you'll be fine." Your friend with cancer doesn't know if he or she will be fine. The whole beginning of the cancer journey is scary and full of anxiety and brings new experiences with uncertain outcomes.

Don't say "I knew someone who had that same type of cancer, and he's fine." Chances are that "someone" did not have the exact same diagnosis or treatment. This is a don't for the same reason noted above. There might be a good time to share this information, but it's not at the outset.

So what do you do? The first thing you should know is that your friend with cancer will be very glad to hear from you. You should relate how you got the news and that you've been thinking about them ever since you heard. Contact from friends who care and provide a listening and sympathetic ear can be therapeutic.

A good place to start is to ask how the cancer was discovered. Was it because of a routine medical exam? Did something unusual or suspicious cause your friend to consult a doctor? Were there concerns due to family history? Was something else going on?

Once you've opened this line of discussion, other subjects will follow naturally. Your questions might include: "What sort of treatment is planned? "Where will you be going for treatment?" "When will your treatment start?" "Will you be missing work?" "How is your family getting along?"

These topics also provide the opportunity to show your willingness to help. Rather than offering a general "What can I do to help?" be more specific: "May I drive you to an appointment?" "Would you like a companion to sit with you at chemotherapy?" "While you're off work, can we get together for lunch?" "When would be a good time for a visit?" Whether accepted or not, these gestures are appreciated.

The more you talk, the easier it will be to continue talking, and, if your friend seems comfortable with it, you can move on to topics unrelated to cancer. This recognizes that there is more to life than just cancer, that you remain interested in those other aspects and that you don't see cancer as defining your friend's life.

Finish with a promise to check in soon and plan an activity – a normal social event unrelated to cancer, such as a seeing a movie, having lunch or going shopping.

Once you have made the initial outreach, you will see that it wasn't as hard as you thought it would be. You and your friend will both be glad that you had a good conversation. You will have laid the foundation for future communication and resuming typical activities that you enjoyed together before your friend's diagnosis.

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