

GriefWork: *Guides for Survival and Growth*



Expressing Kindness in Times of Illness and Death

A co-worker, neighbor or family member is seriously ill, perhaps facing death. You want to reach out, but you're not sure how. Involvement starts with caring—to feel with and for another; to put yourself in her shoes; to be compassionately concerned about the welfare of another person. Your caring gives birth to helping—gestures of practical assistance for the person in need.

One of the benefits as you care and reach out to help is that you grow. Your understanding expands; your skills sharpen; your appreciation for the miracle of life deepens. You realize that in giving you also receive, often in greater measure than the person who receives your help and care.



How do you express kindness when a friend or family member is seriously ill or dying? Perhaps the greatest gift you can give, according to grief specialist and author Alan Wolfelt, is the gift of your presence: Although you must respect your friend's need for rest and time alone, you can visit him frequently, whether at home or in the hospital. Hold his hand and watch the snow fall, or rent a favorite movie and bring popcorn and lemonade. Your simple presence, notes Dr. Wolfelt, says to your friend, "I am willing to walk this difficult road with you and face with you whatever comes."

Along with the very special gift of your presence, here are some suggestions for easing the way as you journey with your friend or loved one toward the future, be it death or recovery from major illness or injury.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FRIENDS AND VOLUNTEER CAREGIVERS

- **Call before you visit.** Be respectful of the person's need for sleep and privacy. Whenever possible, give your friend or loved one a call before stopping by. You might say something like, "If you're up for visitors, I'd like to drop by about 4 o'clock tomorrow and visit for a little while. Is that a good time for you?"
- **Reach out with a loving touch.** A hand to hold, a gentle caress, or a warm embrace creates an instant connection that reassures and comforts.
- **Listen well.** While you are listening, put your personal concerns aside. Listen with receptivity and freshness, even if you've known the person all of your



life. Don't judge, give advice or try to fix the problem. Even if it's painful, let yourself see and feel the world from your loved one's point of view. If she is unable to speak, pay particular attention to nonverbal cues and your own intuition.

- **Be comfortable with silence.** Welcome and allow periods of quietness. Silence is restful, it brings peace. Stillness can be just as supportive as conversation. When hearts share, words often are unnecessary.

- **Accept the person's feelings.** In addition to possible physical discomfort and pain, your friend is probably grieving. Grief involves a range of feelings from rage and fear to acceptance and peace. However he is feeling at the moment, accept it. With time his feelings are likely to change. Don't discount or ignore your friend's feelings. Don't say or even think that he shouldn't be feeling so hopeless or angry. Feelings pass; the gift of being understood and accepted lives on.

- **Smile and laugh.** Laughter invigorates, soothes and delights. From-the-heart smiles and goodnatured humor are good for all of us, particularly for those struggling with life threatening illness and injury. Let your joy bubble up and shine through. Smile; tell a joke; or bring along a funny cartoon when you visit. Humor refreshes, breaks down barriers, and helps to heal the human spirit.

- **Focus on the present.** Do your best to be here now. Live in the present moment, accepting what is—be it pain, a sweet smile, or an exchange of gratitude.

- **Be yourself.** It's OK if you don't know what to say or do. It's OK if you feel awkward or nervous. What's important is that you're doing your best to reach out and help. Just relax and be yourself.

- **Share news.** Talk about what's going on in your

life. Share the latest news about family and friends. Chat about current events and topics that are of interest to your loved one.

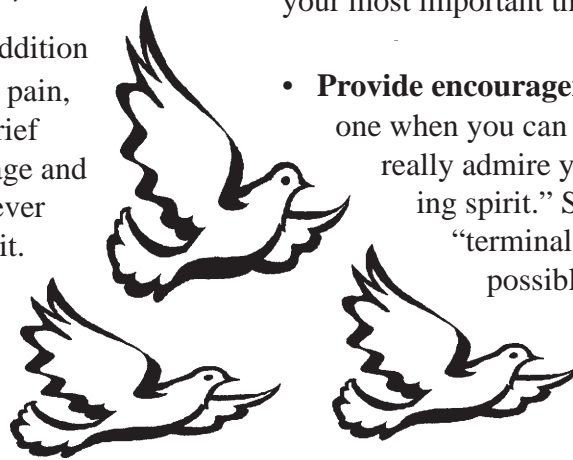
- **Speak truthfully.** If you say, "You're looking good," make sure you really mean it. Don't offer false reassurances or pretend that nothing's wrong. Doing so signals your loved one to hide her real feelings. Speak openly, honestly and kindly. If you think your loved one will soon die, now is the time to express your most important thoughts and feelings.

- **Provide encouragement.** Compliment your loved one when you can do so sincerely: "Uncle Doug, I really admire your positive attitude and fighting spirit." Stay away from words like "terminal" and "hopeless." As much as possible, be a carrier of good cheer and hope. Let your loved one or friend know that you'll do whatever you can to help him feel comfortable and happy.

- **Keep confidences.** When you learn of matters that are personal in nature but not life threatening, keep the information to yourself. Do not violate your friend's trust or your own integrity. If you abide by these principles, those around you will sense that it's "safe" to open up to you if and when they are ready.

- **Express your love or friendship.** As appropriate, express your friendship with fresh flowers, a small gift, a gentle massage, or a special gesture of thoughtfulness. If you feel it, go ahead and say, "I love you." We all thrive on knowing that we have made a difference in another's life and that we are loved and appreciated.

- **Don't push away tears.** Allow your loved one to cry, allow yourself to cry. "Friends and family may believe that crying in front of or with a sick person will be upsetting to the loved one. Not true," says Rabbi Earl Grollman. Dr. Grollman explains that when people weep together, the anguish may actually lessen: "Tears are wordless messages, a vital part of grieving."



- **Send mail.** Drop a humorous card in the mailbox, or mail a cassette tape of uplifting music, or write a brief note and enclose a picture. It can mean so much, and it only takes a matter of minutes.
- **Learn about your friend's illness.** If you have questions about your friend's illness or injury, ask him. You might also seek information from a knowledgeable acquaintance, or look around on the Internet or at your local library for helpful materials. As we become better informed, we often can be more understanding and helpful.
- **Give practical assistance in meeting day-to-day needs.** Bring some of your loved one's favorite food in disposable containers. As needed, provide transportation or clothing. Do a load of wash, clean the kitchen, or contact a distant friend or relative.
- **Help the family.** It may help your friend a lot to know that you're lending a hand to her children or other family members. Also, remember that caring full-time for a seriously ill family member can be exhausting. Taking the regular caregiver's place for an afternoon or day is one of the most practical ways you can assist. It allows you private time with the ill or dying person, and it provides the caregiver a chance to rest and attend to personal needs and responsibilities.
- **Explore other avenues of support.** As appropriate, look into sources of help that your friend and her family may not be aware of—a cancer survivor's group, the local hospice, an AIDS volunteer organization, or an Alzheimer's Disease support group for family members.
- **Allow yourself to grieve.** Particularly if your friend or loved one is dying, you are experiencing a sense of loss and grief. Be gentle with yourself. Remember that the only way out of your grief is through it. Don't fight your feelings; let yourself experience them. Give your grief words by sharing with someone you like and trust. Grief is a natural, healthy process. It's nature's way of bringing us to acceptance, healing and peace.
- **Respect your limits.** One of the best ways to help is by taking good care of yourself. In addition to reaching out to your friend, you may have a demanding job along with personal and family responsibilities. Carve out time for yourself—to rest and recharge your batteries. That way when you're with your friend or loved one, you'll have so much more to give. The quality of time spent together is often more important than the quantity of time.
- **Encourage important decisions.** When we are facing death, we feel better if we are prepared and have drawn together loose ends. You may be led to talk about important end-of-life decisions. Your regional hospice or an attorney can help with information about advance directives, such as a living will.

*In being a blessing for another,
you are blessed. In being a vehicle
for growth, you grow. In being
a conduit for healing,
you are healed.*

James E. Miller

- **Honor the person's spirituality.** If spirituality is important to the person or family, encourage them to draw on this resource as long as doing so feels appropriate to you. The love and acceptance felt in a warm relationship with God or a higher power can be profoundly comforting. Activities such as prayer, meditation, forgiveness, and inspirational reading can bestow a welcome measure of understanding and peace.
- **Trust your intuition.** The guidelines offered above are only suggestions. Every person and every situation is unique. The most important guideline is to trust yourself: Always listen to your inner sense of what is best.



When our bodies become weak because of serious injury, life threatening illness, or the approach of death, it is natural and healthy that we grieve. Physical decline by itself, however, cannot suppress the majesty of the human spirit. Though cancer is only one of many life threatening conditions with which we struggle, the message of "What Cancer Cannot Do" holds a universal reminder for each of us.



What Cancer Cannot Do

- Cancer is so limited—
- It cannot cripple love.
- It cannot shatter hope.
- It cannot corrode faith.
- It cannot destroy peace.
- It cannot kill friendship.
- It cannot suppress memories.
- It cannot silence courage.
- It cannot invade the soul.
- It cannot conquer the spirit.

Source Unknown

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