

Some Truths About Cancer & Relationships

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The language of cancer is often heroic. People diagnosed with cancer are constantly reminded they are strong and told that cancer is a battle and that they should fight. Cancer patients are called “brave” and “soldier” and “survivor.”

Beneath these grandiose words, there is a truth that is only known through experience. Sometimes shared and other times solitary, the reality of these experiences is so much more than words imbued with valor. *That is the first thing you should know: The actual experience of cancer diagnosis and treatment is so much more than the words we use to describe the people going through it.*

Yes, we are brave in that we choose to pursue treatments that may extend life but not without a slew of possibly permanent side effects, or that we choose not to pursue treatments, seeking a better quality of life or hoping that luck or faith will see us through. Our fight, no matter what it looks like, is a mix of perseverance and fear, faith and determination, a willingness to face our fears because the alternative is not something we are ready to accept. Some days we are strong. Others, we are not. Some of us survive, too many don't.

Ultimately, the reality of having cancer is very different from what we've come to know as a culture. And the hard truth is, we probably won't tell you the complete truth about what we are going through because we want to be strong for you. There are, however, a few things you should know and can do to help us as we face the realities of a cancer diagnosis and treatment:

1. We are scared. We know you are too. It's okay to share your fears with us. It'll probably make us more comfortable sharing ours with you.
2. You won't always know what to say. Neither will we. Don't let that keep you from us. We'd rather recognize the problem or sit in silence than lose your friendship.
3. If you really want to do something to help, tell us what you are willing to do and when. We'll probably never take you up on a general offer of “let me know if you need anything,” but we might take you up on “bringing dinner Tuesday after work” or “stopping by Saturday morning to help do the laundry.”
4. Talk to us about normal, everyday things. We long for some normalcy when everything else is turned on its side. Tell us that story about your child misbehaving, or the lady that snored in church, or how your spouse is irritating you. We'll probably have stories like that to share too.
5. Make us a playlist of encouraging songs, or a list of all the shows you recommend we binge watch. We'll probably have a lot of downtime, resting. It's these little gestures that help keep our minds busy and focused on the day to day of living.
6. Please don't tell us about the people you've known with cancer if they died as a result of it. This happens frequently. Empathetic humans like to show they understand others' struggles by sharing their own experiences. In these circumstances, though, recounting those anecdotes isn't helpful if the story doesn't end well. Instead, tell us you “understand how hard this is,” and leave it at that.
7. Tell us about any local resources you know that might be helpful to us while we are going through this. Many communities offer support groups, community events, and other useful resources (like free wigs and bras, financial support, house cleaning services, etc.).
8. Encourage us (yes, even with those heroic words), but also let us know it's okay to be real with you, to cry with you, to break down and have a bad day around you.
9. Forgive us when we're being cranky, moody, sulking, angry, or acting out in other ways. We're still human, and we're dealing with a lot of stress. We may be in constant pain or discomfort from the treatments or side effects, and we are processing some hefty emotional stress. These things take a toll over time and will affect our mood and behavior occasionally.
10. Remember that all of the above apply to our caretakers too. They need love and support as much as we do, sometimes more.

Now that you have a better understanding of some of the hard truths about cancer, embrace what you've learned. There are two great ways to show us just how much our strength has inspired you:

- Be your own best advocate when it comes to your health: start exercising, go see that doctor, lose weight, quit that bad habit. Do something that will make you a healthier person.
- Get involved in your community: attend cancer events and fundraisers, donate money for programs you believe in, help others understand how they can support a loved one as they go through treatment. Share what you've learned with others.

In the end, whether our cancer experience was heroic or not, the relationships are what really matter. It's our connection with you that will last well beyond diagnosis and treatment, no matter how the story ends.