



Keeping Your Foot Out of Your Mouth: Supportive Tips from Those Who've Been There

When a loved one is facing cancer, it can be hard to know what to say or do. The fear of saying the wrong thing or overstepping can be paralyzing. But cancer survivors and caregivers who have walked this road remind us that what matters most isn't perfection. It's presence, compassion, and the willingness to try.

For more than 40 years, Cancer Hope Network has trained cancer survivors and caregivers to provide one-on-one peer mentorship support, offering comfort and connection during some of life's most difficult moments. The insights they share are drawn from experience, not theory, and offer a roadmap for those who want to help but aren't sure how.

Cancer Isolates. Connection Heals.

To someone whose exposure to cancer has been limited to awareness ribbons or workplace fundraisers, the emotional and physical isolation of a diagnosis can be shocking. That isolation often drives friends and loved ones to unintentionally disappear, unsure of how to respond.

 *"I've been both a cancer patient and a caregiver," says Jane, a longtime peer mentor with Cancer Hope Network. "When people find out you have cancer, they're often scared or relieved it's not them. I was lucky to have supportive people in my life, but that isn't always the case."*

Russ, who faced non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, had a similar experience. "People sometimes withdraw because they don't want to bring negativity," he said. "But I always encourage people to stay open. Support may come from unexpected places. My brother only called once during my treatment, but a neighbor who was also a survivor became a daily source of strength."

What Not to Say—and When to Say Something Anyway

Ovarian cancer survivor Gayle remembers well-meaning but misguided comments, "People would say, 'You don't look sick.' I'd think, 'Well, you don't look stupid, but here we are.'"

Discussing cancer, even when it isn't terminal, brings us face-to-face with vulnerability and mortality. That discomfort can lead people to say nothing at all, which can feel even more isolating than an awkward comment. There's nothing you can say that will fix it. But sometimes silence is worse. It's okay to say, "I want to be here for you. I don't know how, but I want to learn."

Greg, a mentor who cared for his wife during her treatment, agrees. "Care, compassion, and trust matter more than saying the right thing. The people who helped me most didn't have technical expertise. They brought solace."

Practical Ways to Show You Care

Support doesn't always come in the form of grand gestures. Here are four meaningful ways to be present for someone facing cancer:

1. Consistent Communication

Staying in touch matters. Bonnie, a lung cancer survivor, begins notes that she supported a long-distance friend by organizing a call chain to keep everyone updated. "Even when I couldn't be there in person, I could still show up emotionally."

Jane turned daily check-in texts into a nightly phone call with a friend. "It gave her something to look forward to and let her know she wasn't alone."

2. Thoughtful Gifts

Rachelle, a breast cancer survivor, cherished a gift of an oncology massage. "It wasn't the best massage technically, but having my body touched in a gentle, loving way was incredibly healing."

3. Acts of Service:

Jeff, a survivor of multiple cancers and a kidney transplant, appreciated simple gestures. "Sometimes, just a hand on the shoulder meant the world."

Rachelle needed rides. "People were good about bringing food, but transportation was critical. I wanted to make my own choices about what I ate and when. And when I couldn't manage the house, a friend cleaned my bathroom and changed the kitty litter. That meant everything."

Patricia found it helpful when friends offered a list of ways to help, instead of asking what she needed. "It's like sales," laughed Jeff. "Don't ask, offer." For example, say, "Do you want me to mow the lawn or do the dishes?"

4. Rallying the Troops

If you're far away, help organize local support. Rachel created a simple spreadsheet to match tasks with willing volunteers. "People want to help, but they need guidance. I couldn't watch her kids myself, but I could make sure someone else did."

Accepting Help Can Be Hard. But It's a Gift.

For many patients and caregivers, accepting help doesn't come naturally. But mentors remind us that giving help can be just as healing as receiving it.

"As a caregiver, I tried to do everything myself," Jane said. "Eventually, I burned out. I tell others: don't make that mistake. Let people help. It's good for them, and it's good for you." Whether you're reaching out or reaching for support, remember... presence matters more than perfection.

Want to connect with someone who's been there? We're here for you. Visit cancerhopenetwork.org to request a free and confidential match with a trained peer mentor.