

10 ways to help a friend with cancer.

She's young. She's a mom. And now she has cancer. It doesn't seem fair. Here's how you can really help.



Candace Williams says nothing can prepare you for when your doctor turns to you and says 'you have cancer.' Yet, that's precisely what happened to her in March, 2011. The 36 year-old esthetician, salon owner and mother of two didn't fit the profile of the typical breast cancer patient. Nonetheless she faced the disease head-on juggling everything during a year of treatment.

"Being sick was really tough for me," she said. "My darkest hour was mid-way through the chemotherapy. I would get sick, and as soon as I started to feel better, I would have to go and get sick again."

Williams faced challenges unique to young women diagnosed with cancer. So often, they are the youngest person in the waiting room and are surrounded by friends who have no frame of reference for what they're going through. In addition to fertility, sex and intimacy and body image challenges, they experience isolation. Online support groups like BrightPink.org and YoungSurvival.org can be incredibly valuable.

So often friends rally around asking what they can do. Besides pray—to whomever, and make it go away—forever, it's hard to know how friends and relatives can help. Here are ten ideas to help a friend battling cancer.

- 1 Offer specific help.** Assume that she needs you and is either reluctant to ask or unable to articulate her needs. Saying “if you need anything, call me” puts the burden on the patient. Psychotherapist Robi Ludwig, and Care.com parenting expert suggests you offer pragmatic things such as driving carpool, making dinner, doing the laundry or the kids' homework. And with her antibodies (and energy) at an all-time low, she'll need a healthy meal and a clean home more than ever. See if you can find a cleaning person to work around her chemo schedule. This might be a gift a few friends can chip in on.
- 2 Help her find a great wig.** Before chemo, take her to start looking for a wig to match her hair color, texture and style. Since a good wig can be very expensive, consider taking up a collection for her from friends. Nonprofits like CancerCare provides wigs, prostheses and mastectomy bras to women who can't afford them. You can also arrange for girlfriends to donate hair to Beautiful Lengths or Locks of Love to support the production of quality wigs—and to show her your support.
- 3 Get pictures taken.** Now might not seem like the best time for a glamour shoot, but before your friend loses her hair, gains or loses weight depending on the drug side-effects, and feels really run down, arrange for a private session with a photographer. Get the family session, but also make sure he takes portraits of her alone. They can be inspirational and empowering for people about to embark on a journey like this.
- 4 Respect her care decisions.** While it may be tempting to bombard her with well-meaning advice, offer to share additional or alternate resources only if she wants them. “She may feel very connected to her doctor and interpret this as trying to take that away,” says Ludwig.
- 5 Be a health buddy.** Cancer patients are overwhelmed by information and emotions caused by endless treatments and doctor appointments. Be her eyes, ears and brain by attending doctors' appointments or handling time-consuming healthcare and insurance tasks. “Sit with her in the waiting room, join her for a cup of tea right before and be there in appointments to be her CNT or Chief Note Taker,” says Lindsay Avner, founder and CEO of Bright Pink.
- 6 Take her mind off cancer.** No matter how well-intentioned, talking about cancer gets old quickly for someone whose life is already consumed by the disease. Let your friend know that you are there to listen and allow her to take the lead about the discussion. She'd welcome hearing funny stories, having a spa day or a sleep-over just to take her mind off her illness.
- 7 Understand her flakiness.** One day she may want to be alone and the next day she may want to be surrounded by friends. Let her know you're OK if she cancels and don't take it personally if a few calls, texts or emails go unanswered, says Avner. Given what she's going through, this is to be expected.

8

Establish an online information warehouse. Answering the same questions about her treatment, diagnosis and/or prognosis can be exhausting and time-consuming. Offer to set up a Facebook page or blog where friends and associates can go for updates on her care and health status. She can manage it, if she's up to it. Or you can post the info she wants people to know. Using a private blog or group can also help you coordinate the carpooling, babysitting and meal-making the local followers will want to take off her hands.

9

Give only the right gift—what she needs. Avner advises skipping the flowers, food and perfumes since women are often sensitive while going through treatment. When cancer survivor Diem Brown realized that many friends wanted to give a gift but didn't know what was appropriate, she started MedGift, the first ever patients' gift registry where people coping with illness or health conditions can post their gift needs, wants and wishes. Help with medical bills, a portable DVD player for the chemo treatments, gift cards to a local caterer are some examples. And if a friend is uncomfortable starting the registry herself, offer to organize it for her.

10

Don't disappear. The trauma of having cancer doesn't go away when treatment ends. Even if she recovers, your friendship is still crucial. This is the time when she has to let go of expectations and listen to her body. "In the past, she may have been a go, go, go social type but now she may need more rest and balance," says Avner. "Creating a new normal and finding the love and trust in her body post-treatment continue well after the last treatment is finished."