

Be a friend to a cancer survivor

Living with cancer is a challenge. No two cancers are alike, just as no two cancer patients are alike. Each circumstance is unique and comes with its own set of challenges. Many cancers can be controlled, and many new treatments are being developed. Cancer is not a death sentence; however it may require unfamiliar lifestyle changes. Research has shown that, in addition to early detection, treatment and care, a positive outlook and support from family and friends play an important role in a cancer survivor's recovery.

When people hear the words "you have cancer" they experience a wide range of feelings: shock, denial, anger, fear, sadness and eventually acceptance. They enter a world of bewildering choices about treatment, pain management health maintenance, financial burdens, changing personal relationships, body image, life expectancy and questions like 'what if?', 'now what?' and 'why me?'. They may even find that cancer is not the most serious problem they have to face.

At the time of diagnosis, a cancer survivor has every reason to believe that he or she will respond well to treatment and go into remission. Such belief offers the best foundation for being hopeful that tomorrow will bring better times.

How can you be a friend to a cancer survivor?

- Practical help is often valuable to a friend going through cancer treatment. Remember that needs change frequently because of time commitments for treatment, symptoms and side effects, energy level, and ability to concentrate. Be creative with the help you offer and be flexible in changing plans as needed.

- It can also mean helping your friend cope with feelings, like when he or she feels sad or angry. Sometimes having someone to talk to is what your friend needs most. If your friend has a primary caregiver, you can help out a lot by relieving some of his or her duties. Many people who were once caregivers say they did too much on their own. Some wished that they had asked for help sooner.

Here are some suggestions:

- Give your friend space, but offer to visit when he or she would like.
- Make flexible plans that can be easily changed, in case something comes up or your friend needs to cancel.
- Make plans for the future - this gives your friend something to look forward to.
- When you make a commitment to help, follow through. For example, if you offer to bring a meal over on Sunday, do not forget.



- Shop for groceries and pick up prescriptions.
- Help with chores around the house, such as getting the mail, taking care of pets, cleaning, doing laundry, taking care of plants and flowers and taking out the garbage.
- Baby-sit children, take them to and from school and evening activities, and arrange for play dates.
- Give your friend a ride to an appointment/ support group or take notes during a doctor's appointment (sometimes people have trouble with medical visits - they don't understand what the doctor says because it can be difficult to deal with their emotions and take in complex medical information, or they forget the questions they wanted to ask). You can also keep your friend company during a treatment session by sitting with him or her during a chemotherapy session.
- Take a scenic drive with your friend when he/she is too weak to take a stroll in the park.
- Be humorous and fun when appropriate and when needed.
- Allow for sadness - do not ignore uncomfortable topics or feelings.
- Respecting privacy is extremely important. It is essential to maintain confidentiality.
- Listen without always feeling that you have to respond, sometimes a caring listener is what the person needs most.
- Expect that the person with cancer will have good days and bad days, emotionally and physically.
- Keep your relationship as 'normal' and balanced as possible.
- Make time for a weekly check-in phone call. Let your friend know when you will be calling, but let him or her know that it is okay to not answer the phone.
- Try not to let your friend's condition get in the way of your friendship. Treat him or her the same way you always have.

- Ask about interests, hobbies, and other topics not related to cancer - people going through treatment sometimes need a break from talking about cancer.
- If you aren't sure how to help, ask.

What to say - simple guidelines to use when talking with your friend

Avoid saying:

- I know just how you feel
- You need to talk
- I know just what you should do
- I feel helpless
- I don't know how you manage
- I'm sure you'll be fine
- Unsolicited advice or to be judgemental
- Don't worry
- How much time do the doctors give you?
- Let me know what I can do (instead, offer specific ways in which you can help and things you can provide, should they need to call on you)

Do say:

- I'm sorry this has happened to you
- If you ever feel like talking, I am here to listen
- What are you thinking of doing, and how can I help?
- I care about you

CANSA offers a unique integrated service to the public and to all people affected by cancer. CANSA is a leading role-player in cancer research and the scientific findings and knowledge gained from our research are used to realign our health programmes, as well as strengthen our watchdog role to the greater benefit of the public. Our health programmes comprise health and education campaigns; CANSA Care Centres that offer a wide range of care and support services to those affected



by cancer; stoma and other clinical support; medical equipment hire, as well as a toll-free line to offer information and support. We also supply patient care and support in the form of 12 CANSA Care Homes in the main metropolitan areas for out-of-town cancer patients and CANSA-TLC lodging for parents and guardians of children undergoing cancer treatment.

Join a caring community

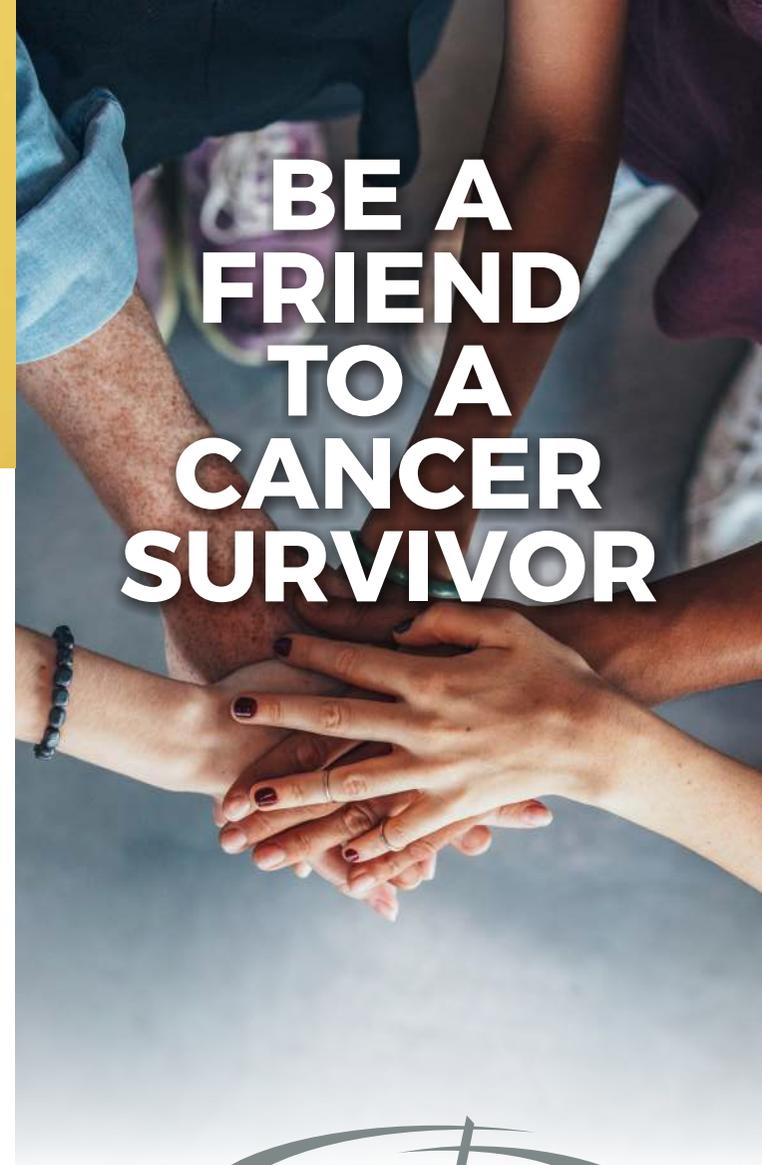
Join your local CANSA Support Group: www.cansa.org.za/cancer-counselling/ or join our Facebook community of survivors and caregivers: **@CANSA Survivors - Champions of Hope** **@CANSA Caring for the Caregivers** or if you a cancer survivor sign up at www.isurvivor.org.za



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