

Despite billions spent on research and education, far too many people will be diagnosed with breast cancer this year. Women (and men) who hear the words “you have breast cancer” may experience a myriad of emotions: fear, anger, betrayal, powerlessness, resentment, loneliness. They will need a lot of things (such as information and access to good care) and the one thing they may need that you can give is support. You can help your friend, family member, or loved one. Here are some ideas for how:

Simply listen. Many newly diagnosed patients need someone to listen. They need to express their fears. You don't need to fix feelings.

Seek support for yourself. You may have your own strong feelings – perhaps shock, fear, grief, or anger. You will need support, too. Give yourself time and space to acknowledge your feelings. While you may want to talk to someone else, be aware of your loved one's privacy and their wishes about sharing the news with others.

Be real. Be authentic. You know your friend, family member, or loved one and know if she/he will appreciate a good laugh, a distraction, or the time and space to cry.

Provide a safe place to experience and share feelings freely. You can be a mirror for your loved one's emotions. Play back to them what you hear them say as a way to help clarify their own thoughts and feelings. Don't presume what they are feeling, and don't dismiss their thoughts or fears. For most people who are afraid, hearing an empty platitude of “Don't worry, it will be fine” is not helpful or supportive.

Don't tell her/him how to feel or what you would do in her/his situation. Remember, you are not in her/his situation and you don't really know what choices you would make. Every situation is different. There are many different kinds of breast cancer and many different decisions to make. These are personal decisions and everyone makes them based on their own values and experiences.

Do give advice when asked. You may choose to research treatment options and particulars to your loved one's situation in order to talk about breast cancer intelligently.

Information overload is common among newly diagnosed patients. You may help by reading up on research and treatment options, and sharing what is relevant with them.

Offer to accompany your friend to doctor appointments. Suggest recording the doctor's discussions and help prepare a list of questions to bring to the appointment (see BCAction's Newly Diagnosed Packet for suggested questions). Doctors give a lot of information during appointments, and your friend, family member, or loved one may need help processing everything. Be clear on your role. For example, are you there to ask questions? Facilitate the conversation between doctor and patient? Take notes?

Offer practical support. This could include driving your friend, family member, or loved one to and from treatments. She/he may be nervous or anxious about a treatment, and may not feel well coming out of treatment. Having someone to swiftly take her/him back home could be of great relief, and the companionship you provide may be welcome, too.

Ask, don't guess. Ask your friend, family member, or loved one to tell you exactly what they need and when. They may not know at the time, but be prepared for when they do.

Organize friends & family to help with household needs such as babysitting, housecleaning, and food shopping and preparation. This will allow your loved one the personal time she/he needs right now and helps them conserve energy.

Join BCAction. Get involved. Everyone can do something besides worry.

BCAction's mission is to achieve health justice for all women at risk of and living with breast cancer. We believe that breast cancer is a public health crisis and a social justice issue and we envision a world where lives and communities aren't threatened by breast cancer. For more information go to www.bcaction.org.

