

THE CANCER CHANNEL

One year.
Two cancers.
Three miracles.

Sarah E. McDonald



5 THINGS NOT TO SAY TO SOMEONE DIAGNOSED WITH CANCER (AND WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD)

1. “You got this.” or “Cancer picked the wrong person to mess with.”

Why: Because I don’t feel like I got this. Cancer is scary, unpredictable, and when you tell me you got this, it makes me feel like getting better all rests on MY shoulders. And guess what – there are a lot of people whom I’ve just met (!!) who have more control over this disease than me and that loss of control is terrifying. And when you say “cancer picked the wrong person,” I feel like I need to be strong all of the time when what I really feel is vulnerable and scared.

Instead say: “I got you. I hate that you have cancer and I am so sorry you are going through this. I’ll check in with you weekly to start to see if you need anything. Call me in the meantime if there’s anything I can do. And no matter how much hair you lose – I’m still planning on hanging out with you.”

2. “You have a great attitude.”

Why: Because no one has a great attitude about having cancer. Cancer pisses me off, actually. But I fear if I say out loud how I’m really feeling, I might not be a lot of fun to be around and I really need people I love around me right now. So, the reality is I’m just pretending to have a great attitude.

Instead say: “Wow – I can’t believe you’re smiling at me when I imagine what you really want to do is punch someone or something and cry.” Or better yet “I’m really sorry you’re going through this and will keep you in my thoughts (and on my text speed dial)” and leave it at that.

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3. “Let me know what I can do for you?”

Why: Because cancer requires ninja-level project management skills to keep track of all of the doctor appointments and cancer treatments and battles with the insurance company. When you say “let me know what I can do for you” it feels like you are asking me to be in charge of you and that feels unfair. Honestly, it adds to my overwhelming to do list rather than taking away from it. Though if you’d like to help me find some CBD gummies – I would be much obliged.

Instead say: “I would like to mow your lawn, bring over a treat (ice cream comes to mind), drive you to an appointment, etc. or anything else that might be helpful around 2pm today. Is that a convenient time?” If not, simply ask “Is there another time I can bring by this (insert really helpful thing like ice cream) and hang out with you?”

4. “I could never go through what you’re going through.”

Why: Because you could and you would. Just like I didn’t choose cancer - you’d do everything you could to beat cancer too. When you say “I could never go through what you’re going through,” I know you mean it as a compliment. It is your gentle way of saying I’m some kind of cancer hero - but please don’t make me sound like a hero – because I’m not. I’m scared and I hate this and I am just doing everything I’m told to try to stay alive.

Instead say: “I am so sorry you’re going through this.” And “can I bring you some ice cream.”

5. “I had an aunt who had cancer . . .”

Why: Because all cancers are different and what worked for your aunt may or may not be what the doctors believe will work for me. Cancer understanding and protocols are changing every day. The experience you had with your aunt’s breast cancer ten years ago simply doesn’t translate well to treatment and prognosis with salivary gland or lung or prostate or brain (or possibly even my breast cancer!) today. It just doesn’t.

Instead say: “Can I bring you ice cream today.” Yes, ice cream solves all ills for cancer patients. If you want to help your loved one who has cancer - small, thoughtful acts are the way to go. Send a text, send a card, bring the ice cream to let them know you’re thinking of them. Then do it again. Regular check-ins to let a cancer patient know you care are a lifeline to the isolation they are feeling on cancer island. You can’t “fix” cancer for them - but you can help them feel less alone. Let the ice cream speak for you.