

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Upon finding out that your loved one has been diagnosed with breast cancer or ovarian cancer, the first question many ask is “What can I do to be there for them?”. Here are some helpful hints to best support your loved one at each stage of their cancer journey.

### AT DIAGNOSIS

**Follow their lead.** Let your loved one share the information they choose to share in the way that is most comfortable for them. Listening is a caring gesture that shows you support them.

**Validate their feelings.** Your loved one may be experiencing a range of emotions. While it’s tempting to share stories about other people with cancer or offer “pep talks”, remember that this is their experience and they will set the emotional tone at any given time.

**Let them make the decisions.** When your family member or friend is diagnosed with cancer, they may feel like circumstances are out of their control. In the areas where they can maintain control, let them do so. You can gently offer suggestions or help them think things through out loud, but in the end, support the decisions they make.

**Create your own support system.** Although your loved one is the one diagnosed with cancer, their journey will have a tremendous impact on you. It is important to develop your own support system, whether it is a friend, colleague, spiritual leader, or mental health professional.

### DURING SURGERY OR TREATMENT

**Be clear about what you can offer.** It’s tempting to ask your loved one what you can do to be helpful. Recognize that they may not know what they need, or they may ask for assistance you are unable to provide.

**Keep in touch.** Treatment or recovery from treatment can continue for a length of time. Remember to reach out and stay in touch. A quick note, e-mail, or phone message saying “I am thinking of you” will lift their spirits and help them continue to feel supported. Let them know that it is ok if they do not return your e-mails or phone calls.

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**Life beyond cancer.** Your loved one may be seeking to experience life beyond cancer when engaged in their daily activities and routines. Allow them to take the lead and avoid overwhelming them with questions about illness or treatment. Remember, too, that their family members may also want to experience life beyond cancer and are not a conduit for information about how their loved one is coping.

### AFTER TREATMENT

**Remember that healing is a long-term process.** On the outside, they may look the same as before her diagnosis, but they have been changed by this experience. They have survived and managed the medical, physical, and logistical aspects of cancer. They may now be ready to look back and emotionally process what has happened. They may also worry about future risk of recurrence. Embrace who they have become during this journey; continue to follow their lead and be a good listener. Let them know you are still there for them.

**For some, the journey continues.** Your loved one may be living with advanced breast cancer or recurrent ovarian cancer as a chronic illness. Their feelings and experiences may fluctuate, so it's important to follow their lead and, as always, be a good and compassionate listener. Regularly review these helpful hints and continue the meaningful and caring support that you have been offering throughout their experience. Remember to pace yourself, use your own support system, and delegate responsibilities when necessary.