

BEING THERE when a friend has cancer

My friend has brain cancer. I haven't called her yet to tell her I care. Sadly, I'm not alone. Many choose to avoid a friend who has cancer – not because they don't care, but because they're unsure of what to say and do.

Initially, cancer victims feel devastated, disorientated and confused. However, after the shock, they may want to talk about it. Sharing and expressing feelings is a vital part of therapy, as no one should bear a trauma alone.

Still unsure how to approach my friend, I contacted the Canadian Cancer Society. Kristine Carrick, coordinator of Marketing and Communications for the Fraser Valley Region named several sources for information. And she kindly offered her own advice. She suggested treating my friend as I normally would have in the past.

"Despite the changes going on in her body, she's still the same person," said Carrick, adding this is how she would prefer to be treated.

Each person and each situation is different, Carrick said, but she agrees with the Canadian Cancer Society, that all cancer patients need the support of family and friends. You can build trust and strengthen the bonds of your friendship by showing you recognize their needs and feelings. A card, flowers, a phone call is all they need to feel your love and support.

Ask what they are feeling, but then let them decide if they want to talk about their illness. Listen to them. Give them all your attention but don't offer advice unless they ask for it. Allow them to express their emotions like fear, frustration and anger. And express yours too.

The Canadian Cancer Society offers many other suggestions. If you see something you may be able to do, do it without asking. Your friend may be uncomfortable with asking you. Taxi their kids, or pick up the dry cleaning. Supply prepared food, like a casserole or a sandwich plate.

Help them focus more on total wellness and less on body image. Things like hair loss and weight loss are bound to bring feelings of self-consciousness. Offer help with clothing, hair and makeup, or lend a scarf or hat - but keep stressing the importance of regaining their health, not their looks.

Cancer patients with active lives enjoy a better quality of life and seem to live longer. Staying active helps keep the thoughts off fear. Social activities like going to movies or taking a course together aid in keeping the mind preoccupied. To bring back feelings of confidence, help them get back into normal daily patterns; retaining normalcy can retain sanity. They may welcome the distraction of their jobs and should be encouraged to continue working.

Remember their family. They're going through a difficult time too. Let the children know you are there for them to answer their questions, or to listen to something they are uncomfortable to share with the ill family member. Talking about cancer to children helps them overcome their fears. Try to help the spouse with

the added strain and responsibilities as well. Suggest outings like a picnic or invite them for meals, rent videos and make popcorn.

Be compassionate to their changing emotions. Listen when they want to talk, but don't take offense if they want to be left alone. Feelings may change suddenly. There will be fear and worry, guilt, sadness, and even anger. They may also be lonely, feeling as though no one knows what they are going through. And unless you've also experienced a life-threatening illness, you can't know.

Carrick suggests they contact The Canadian Cancer Society's service Cancer Connection. This service can arrange a meeting with a volunteer who is a survivor of their particular type of cancer. This will combat the isolation they may feel, and at the same time brings hope for recovery.

Carrick also advised me to do what feels right for me. Some people are good at offering support simply by listening. Others like to help with daily tasks. Consider this approach: If you were diagnosed with a life-threatening disease, how would you like to be treated?

I think I'll make that call to my friend now.

Visit www.cancer.ca or phone toll-free 1-888-939-3333 for more information about Cancer Connection and other cancer support services. ■

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13 ■ SOUNDER MAGAZINE ■ JUNE 10, 2006

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