

How to Help Your Loved One Through Breast Cancer

by Cathy Chapman, Ph.D., LCSW

I was attending a workshop out of state when I received a phone call. Standing in the hall I heard the words, "Suzanne has been diagnosed with breast cancer." I literally almost collapsed. My knees buckled and I had to catch myself or I would have been on the floor. Hearing that a dear friend had breast cancer was such a shock I didn't know what to do but wander around the halls for a while.

Any of us, when we hear a friend or family member has been diagnosed with cancer, are in a state of shock. If we are in shock, can you begin to imagine the state of shock the one diagnosed feels?

The immediate question for me and I suppose, for anyone, was, "What can I do?"

Below you will find suggestions for help and support. I would like to preface them with a few short paragraphs.

We human beings are wondrously made. We consist of body, mind and spirit. Each aspect of ourselves affects every other aspect of ourselves, and radiates out to affect those around us.. When someone becomes ill physically or emotionally, that person needs to find ways to bring themselves back into balance. A diagnosis of cancer immediately affects the mind and spirit. Fear surges from the pit of the stomach and engulfs the person. The ability to think, hear and process information seems to disappear. The thought "I can die," which we all know is true, stares our loved one in the face. "She can die" stares us in our faces. The specter of death perches on everyone's shoulder.

An integral aspect of our wondrously made selves is the body-mind connection. I prefer to say the body-mind-spirit connection because I work from a spiritual foundation as well as the mind-body connection. When a crisis occurs in the physical aspect of ourselves, we need to bring the mental and spiritual parts into balance. That balance will assist in bringing the physical back into balance.

When a loved one is diagnosed, the first reaction is a sense of helplessness. You may want to scream, yell and fight the universe, or God, for your friend. You feel powerless. You don't think there is anything you can do to assist her healing. The truth is, you can. What you do can be just as crucial to her healing as whatever treatments, allopathic or complementary, she utilizes.

Research in the field of mind-body psychology, or psychoneuroimmunology, is progressing at a rapid rate. Very simply, we know that giving support to the mind, the emotions the spirit has a direct, not indirect, effect upon the immune system. Healing from cancer requires the immune system to be in top notch shape. If it had been, cancer would not have shown up. You can assist in supporting her immune system. Your support and love works in a synergistic manner with what her doctors do.

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Following are some very simple things you can do to assist in your loved ones healing.

Take care of your own emotions first

You know the saying, "First, put the mask on yourself and then place it on your child."

What I mean by this is, talk to someone else about your feelings about the diagnosis before you talk to your loved one. Your loved one needs support and hope, not fear. She is already battling fear. She doesn't need yours. If you have no one to talk to, write it down. Write down all your fears, everything you want to say in your panic. Write it down. Get your feelings out...NOW.

Then call your friend.

Form a Healing Circle

Tell your friend that you would like to form her personal Circle in Pink Prayer Circle. Gather together friends, loved ones and anyone else (co-workers, etc) who want to be a part of the circle. You will bless and pray for your friend. A format for a healing circle is found at www.healingsilks.com

Part of this circle can be scheduling time each of you can bring food, pick up the kids, and even provide rides to appointments.

Write notes, Send cards

When my friend was going through treatment, I wanted her to know I was thinking of her. I wanted to do something. At least once a week, and often more, I sent her a card or note. She later told me how important they were to her. She could read them repeatedly or just see them gathered together and feel the love and support.

When faced with recovery, there are times your loved one will not want to talk or visit with anyone. You will not always know when that time is. Set aside time to send cards and notes. She can read them when she has time and energy.

And, yes, email is a way to communicate. Some will be able to connect with the support they see in a stack of envelopes, others will feel more connected, when looking at messages via email at their computer or text messages on their cell phone.

Pray while seeing her whole

We are learning so much about prayer through the scientific method of research. There is some evidence that praying for someone while imaging her whole, well, and complete is more effective than thinking of him or her as ill.

Why? Isn't prayer, prayer?

With the studies of quantum physics and what we are learning about consciousness, vibration, frequency and energy, we are able to understand part of what happens in prayer.

Our thoughts and feelings produce energy. Each of us has had an experience where we just know someone is angry or sad, or a place is peaceful or chaotic, just by being there. This happens because the feelings produce an energy that emanates from the individual. When a place is filled with peaceful people, that peace fills the room. When you are sad, angry, happy or peaceful, you send out that energy.

Know that I'm not telling you that the way you pray is "wrong." Please pray in the way that fills you with the greatest comfort and love.

If you don't know how to pray, here are some suggestions:

- In whatever way you use to pray, form an image of her whole, healthy, joyful.
- Ask God, or whatever name you use for your Higher Power, to fill (name) with all the love she needed today but did not receive. "See" love pouring into her and filling her.
- Form an image of you with your loved one. See you holding your palms out facing her. From your heart, see a beam of energy, your love, flowing from you to her.
- Hold her picture in your hand and, from your heart send of beam of energy to her, filling her.

Don't ask "what," offer something specific

Asking, "What can I do for you?" is too general. She or her family may not have something specific they can think of at that moment. They may not want to impose. Offer something specific.

- If she has children, offer to shuttle the kids to and from somewhere.
- Offer to take her to the doctor or another appointment.
- Offer to stay with her at home if her husband or partner needs to get away...or even just take a shower without worrying if she is going to be alright.
- Find out what food sits well with her now and bring it. Ask her when would be the best time to drop it off.
- Offer to do the laundry, clean the house, or walk the dog.

Visiting guidelines

Visiting can be a tremendous support. There will be times that she needs to know through
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physical presence that someone cares. There will be other times when she just doesn't have the energy or emotional stamina to have visitors other than select family members and close friends. You will know if you are one of these select people because you have been an on-going part of her life.

Some guidelines for visiting:

- Call first.
- Good friends have more latitude than acquaintances. Even good friends need to be aware when the greatest support is to not come or to leave.
- Keep it short unless you are invited to stay longer.
- Bring humor to your visit. She may not have any interest in discussing what is happening with her treatment. She may want to be distracted.
- If she broaches the topic of her fears, listen.
- When you are upset or despondent, don't visit and don't call.
- Don't be offended if she doesn't seem interested in your visit.
- Don't talk about your or anyone else's illnesses or disasters.
- If there is any hint that she is tired, leave graciously.

Remember that your friend and her family will be on a roller coaster of emotions. The closer you are with her, the more your emotions will join her on the roller coaster. You want to give her support and hope. You do not want to feed her fear. Take care of yourself.

Your gentle and loving support can assist her in knowing she is cared for and loved. Those feelings will cause a biochemical reaction in her body, which strengthens her immune system. A stronger immune system will assist her recovery. You can do something to help.

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