

Special Needs of Cancer Patients

**Cancer patients need someone to minister to them.
(Turn to “Definition of a Ministering Person” in this section of
your binder.)**

These patients...

- Need to experience God’s love in their circumstances.
- Need to be able to trust someone to walk alongside them and be accepting.
- Need to minimize and/or eliminate habitual, negative reactions to life, which render them more vulnerable to cancer, according to past research.
 - Early 1960s psychiatrists Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe noticed that an unusually high percentage of cancer patients had experienced relatively severe psychological trauma between 6-18 months before diagnosis. Cancer patients should consider if they are being affected by a past traumatic event that may still be depressing the immune system (e.g., unforgiveness and revenge).¹ But we should never leave the impression that cancer patients did something to get cancer.
- Need to be a part of community.
 - Research shows that cancer patients often feel their family and friends are abandoning them because of the cancer. Dr. Camile Wortman, a noted psychologist, conducted a study of the perceived support available to breast cancer patients in 1987. 72 percent of the respondents reported they were treated differently after people knew they had cancer. Of these, 75 percent indicated they were misunderstood by others, and more than 50 percent reported they were avoided or feared.²
- Need to learn to communicate what they are feeling and not just react.

¹ Benjamin, H. P. (1989). *From Victim to Victor: For Cancer Patients and Their Families*. New York: Dell.

² Ibid., 24.

- Family structure may be profoundly affected. Women with breast cancer, for instance, may feel less attractive, less desirable. Men may feel as if they are no longer valuable if cancer hinders them from providing. They may feel like a financial burden. Fear isolates: “They could not handle it if they knew how scared I am.” Anger may make family members feel like they cannot win: “Do they not know how sick I am?” or “Why are they treating me like an invalid?”

Cancer patients have often heard many of the following customary phrases and begin to see them as empty, trite or cold:

- “God will work all this to the good, you will see.”
- “If you only have enough faith, I am sure you will get well.”
- “God will never give you more than you can handle.”
- “Let me know if there is anything I can do for you...” and then the person is gone.
- “I will pray for you...” and then there is no praying done.

REMEMBER: Cancer is a personal journey. Listen and pray before offering specific scriptures. Ask God what He wants to say to the cancer patient. Jesus said different things to different people. He asked one, “Do you want to be well?” He asked another what the problem was. Another time, He asked a man if he believed Jesus could heal him. To another, He simply said He wanted to heal him and told him to be healed. Jesus was very specific in what He said to each person because He wanted them to be healed from the inside out. Cancer patients need their spirit to work with their body in this battle.

Cancer patients need you to be natural. As much as possible, treat the cancer patient the same as you would anyone else.

- Do not be afraid to talk directly with the patient about cancer and how it is affecting them.
- Maintain regular contact with the patient. Do not be afraid to hug or touch them.
- Do not pity the patient.
- Do not tell stories about cancer or any other disease.
- Do tell success stories – as many as you hear.
- Refrain from well-intentioned advice unless asked for it.

- Additionally, make a point to talk about other things beyond cancer, like the person's interests, hobbies, etc. It is not the end-all in a person's life.

Cancer patients do not need you to trivialize what they are going through.

- Should a cancer patient go through hair loss and feel badly about it, do not say, "Well, which would you rather lose, your hair or your life?" Be sure not to say things like, "It is only hair."
- Consider shaving your own head hair to go through this indignity with the cancer patient.
 - Loss is loss, and when patients are already feeling out of control with this disease that has invaded their lives, one more loss, whether hair or body part or anything else, is a big deal. Body image is part of feeling good about who you are and how you are perceived. When cancer takes something from patients, and they have had no choice in the matter, it is just one more thing that is part of this traumatic experience. Patients need understanding.

Cancer patients need a listening heart.

- They deal with fear, anger, grief, what ifs and why me questions, guilt, control, and regret.
- They may also deal with chemical imbalances in their bodies created by the treatment itself (e.g., chemo can throw a woman into menopause and create serious hormonal imbalances).
- They need to know their feelings are normal.
- They need a safe place to vent. Maybe they are angry with God, with the church or with someone who has told them something that they have discovered is not true.
- They need to think about what gives their life meaning, what is important, what their purpose is and what others can draw from them.
- They need to know it is not too late to make changes, if they want to make them.

Cancer patients need hope.

- They need to understand that only God knows the number of days allotted to them, not a doctor or anyone else.
- They need to know people are standing with them if they choose to fight the cancer.

- They need to know it is okay to be themselves as they battle along, and that they will not be abandoned.
- They do not need false hope, but they do need hope, like we all do, for each day that we live.
- They need to think through a “new normal.”
- They need to see themselves as active participants in a fight for recovery and not as victims who have no recourse but to give in to their fears, depression and fatigue, and to isolate themselves and prepare to die.

Cancer patients need to know someone is praying for them.

- Focus prayers on who God is and on who the person is in Christ. (Turn to the handouts under Resources in this binder.)
 - This enables the cancer patient to think about God and how He is so much bigger than cancer, people or any circumstances – and to consider how God sees the person, what He created him or her to be in Christ.
- Physical healing may not be the most critical healing a cancer patient needs.
 - God knows the deepest needs may be spiritual, emotional, mental or relational. Be faithful to pray, seek Him and ask Him to give you insight and wisdom in what to pray for, what to say and how to minister.

Cancer patients need someone to help them with daily tasks while they are battling this disease.

- Perhaps they are tired. Perhaps they are emotionally drained and wondering if the battle is worth the effort. Perhaps they have real image problems because of loss of hair or a body part, and so are becoming more and more isolated to not have to face people. Perhaps they are exhausted at the thought of even trying to keep the house clean, cook the meals, run the errands, care for their children and pay bills.
- While you do not want to do for them what they can do for themselves, you do want to be involved enough to learn and see what needs might be there and how they could be met to take that burden off the patients and their caregivers.

Cancer patients may have low white blood counts during treatment.

- Call to make sure it is okay to visit. When blood counts are low, a cancer patient is highly susceptible to disease and often is confined to the house and not allowed visitors for a few days.