

Helping a friend or colleague with breast cancer



Breast
Cancer
Network
Australia



Friends can be a wonderful source of emotional and practical support during the breast cancer journey. Sometimes acquaintances become good friends – but, sadly, close friends sometimes fall away, perhaps because they don't know what to say or how to help.

In this brochure, women who have had breast cancer share with you the things they found helpful and unhelpful. We hope their suggestions will help you provide meaningful support to your friend.

Of course, it's impossible to say for sure what will or won't help your friend. While many of the women who contributed to this brochure volunteered the same suggestions, not everyone wanted the same type or level of support. Take your lead from your friend. Listen for cues from her and don't be afraid to make suggestions.

We thank Kathy Kuipers for her original inspiration and the many women who helped with ideas and suggestions for this brochure.

HELPING A FRIEND

First things first – dealing with your own feelings

The news that your friend has breast cancer has probably come as a shock to you. Before you start to think about helping her, you may want time to absorb this information and to think about what it means to you. Your friend with breast cancer doesn't need to hear about your fears and worries at this time. You may even want to talk about your thoughts and feelings with a close friend or family member.

Nowadays, most women survive breast cancer. Reading about breast cancer will inform you about the disease and the way it is treated. This may help when talking with your friend.

Information about breast cancer is available from:

- Breast Cancer Network Australia
www.bcna.org.au 1800 500 258 (freecall)
- Cancer Council's Cancer Helpline 13 11 20
- Cancer Australia (formerly National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre)
www.canceraustralia.gov.au 1800 624 973 (freecall)





Emotional help

Be available to listen

- Don't be too afraid that you won't know what to say. Just be yourself. Often there is no need for words.
- If you have had breast cancer, respect that her journey will be different from yours. Follow her lead - offer information as she asks for it. Your special gift is your ability to listen and empathise.
- Offer support, encouragement and respect.
- Respond to her wishes and treat her normally, without fussing.
- Cry with her, laugh with her, listen to her.
- Let her talk about anything.
- Let her know that you are here for her. She can call you or you can visit her if she needs you.
- Talk to her about the best time of the day to check in on her. Be aware that she may tire easily.
- When you call, check that it's a good time for her to talk.
- Often women with breast cancer lie awake at night worrying. If you don't mind taking her calls in the middle of the night, let her know.
- Respect that there will be times when she doesn't want to talk and needs time to herself. You can still be there for her in other ways.
- Keep her confidences.

Let her know you care

- Your friend may find it very difficult to ask for help. Saying 'if there is anything you need, just let me know' is less helpful than anticipating her needs - for example, a homemade dinner may be very gratefully accepted!
- It's best not to visit if you are sick yourself.
- Leave sick or noisy children at home.
- Keep in mind that you might have to make the first move in offering support. Don't be offended if she doesn't get back to you right away. Try again.
- Stay in touch with her with letters, cards, emails and text messages.
- She may welcome a chance to have some fun. In the beginning, and for many months to come, your friend may feel as though her world revolves around cancer. Do something you have always enjoyed doing together.

Be there for her family

- Ask her partner and her children how they are feeling and listen to their responses. People often focus on the woman but partners and children need to be heard and supported as well.
- Talk with them about ways in which they'd like to be supported.
- Your partner may be able to provide support for her partner.



Gifts

She may appreciate an inexpensive special gift – whatever you can do, or afford.

Here are some suggestions:

- Flowers from your garden
- Hugs
- A hand, foot or whole body massage
- A treasure box for cards and letters
- A journal
- A painting from a child
- Her favourite movies, music, or relaxation CDs
- Perfume or fragrant soaps
- A sweet treat
- Novels or magazines
- Anything that will make her laugh
- If you have one, offer your holiday house for a break.

The unexpected is especially treasured. Have a little gift or card waiting for her at the hospital when she arrives for treatment or arrives home.

Celebrate the milestones in her journey, such as the end of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, getting rid of a wig, one year after diagnosis, two years and so on.



Some practical ways you can help

- Prepare nutritious home-cooked meals, soups, biscuits and cakes, that can be frozen and used when needed. Hint: it doesn't take long to get sick of spaghetti bolognese!
- Help with housework, gardening or looking after pets. For several weeks after surgery, hanging out washing, vacuuming and ironing may be physically difficult for her.
- Take her shopping and carry packages, or take a list and do it for her.
- If she wants information, help her find it. See the back of this brochure for information and support services.
- If she has children, offer to help with school drop-off or pick-up or social and sporting events. Babysit for an afternoon or a day, or have the children overnight occasionally.
- Offer to drive her to medical appointments and, if she wants, stay with her while she sees the doctor or has treatment. Perhaps you could work out a roster of family and friends to cover each visit.
- Offer to go with her if she needs to buy a wig or breast prosthesis.
- If she lives alone or has little support, she may appreciate help sorting through medical bills, Medicare claims and household expenses.
- Ask her what else she would like you to do, and listen for clues.
- Keep ringing and visiting her.

Things that WON'T help

- Don't tell her about the latest cure or treatment you've heard about.
- Don't burden her with your fears or worries.
- Don't tell her any horror stories about other people with cancer.
- Don't tell her how she should be changing her lifestyle or diet.
- Platitudes such as: 'There must be a reason for this'; 'Everything will turn out well in the end'; or 'You look great' may not help.
- Don't tell her to 'Be positive'. This may make it hard for her to talk to you about how she really feels.



HELPING A COLLEAGUE

Special considerations for the workplace

A number of factors influence the type of treatment a woman will receive for breast cancer. Some women will require only one type of treatment, for example surgery, and will be able to return to work within a month or two: others will need months of ongoing treatment.

Some women return to work as quickly as possible because they crave the normality and camaraderie that work offers. Other women require time away from work to deal with breast cancer and its treatment without the rigours and strains of the workplace. Each woman's response and needs will be different.

The diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer may affect your colleague physically, emotionally and mentally. Even if you've had colleagues with cancer before, remember that treatments vary and that each woman will react differently.

Often, colleagues are also friends, so many of the ideas already listed here will be true for colleagues as they are for friends.

The best ways to help your colleague will depend on the type of work she does, her treatment and whether or not she needs or wants to work. The following suggestions may help.





If you're her manager

- Some women are happy for everyone to know about their breast cancer, others aren't. Find out what she wants others to know, and whether she would like you to break the news for her.
- Establish her sick leave entitlements and discuss other ways you may be able to help financially, if this is possible and appropriate.
- Be flexible with time off. Your colleague may need time off for doctor's appointments, tests and treatment. At times she may feel physically unwell.
- Before she returns to work, discuss whether there are any limitations which may affect her ability to do her job.
- Be aware that how she feels may change from day to day or week to week. Some days she'll be more capable than others.
- Discuss the possibility of a gradual return to work.
- Arrange for someone to help out if her workload gets too much for her.
- If possible, you might provide an on-site car park so she doesn't have to use public transport.

For managers and colleagues

- Treat her normally, but let her know you understand her situation.
- Don't be afraid to ask her how she is feeling.
- Provide her with opportunities to talk if she wants to.
- Field questions from curious customers and clients.
- Remember to invite her to social functions even if she's not at work. She may say no, but at least she'll still feel part of the team.

Things that WON'T help

- Avoiding her.
- Making assumptions about what she can and can't do and taking over for her.
- Asking too many questions.
- Asking inappropriate questions such as 'Were you a smoker?' or 'Is it in your family?'.

You're probably a friend as well as a colleague, so you may find the suggestions listed in the 'friends' section useful as well.



FURTHER INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Breast Cancer Network Australia

www.bcna.org.au

1800 500 258 (freecall)

Breast Cancer Network Australia is the national voice for Australians affected by breast cancer. We offer information and support for women with breast cancer, their families and friends, through our *My Journey Kit*, brochures, website, online network, forums and *The Beacon*, our free quarterly magazine.

Cancer Council's Cancer Helpline

13 11 20

Cancer Australia (formerly National Breast and Ovarian Cancer Centre)

www.canceraustralia.gov.au

1800 624 973 (freecall)

The *My Journey Kit* is available free to women diagnosed with breast cancer in the last 12 months. Call **1800 500 258** or visit www.bcna.org.au to order your kit.

Inform • Empower • Represent • Link together

Breast Cancer Network Australia
293 Camberwell Road
Camberwell Victoria 3124
Australia

1800 500 258 (freecall)

www.bcna.org.au

