

How to support a loved one fighting Cancer

Shared perspectives from the men and women who have fought the disease



One of the hardest things we may ever experience is watching someone we love battle with cancer. The reality is that 1 in 4 South Africans is affected by cancer, either through their own or through a loved one, family member or colleague being diagnosed. This means that many of us will, at some stage or another, either fight the disease ourselves or watch someone we love in a battle with this disease.

This guide by Sanlam in collaboration with the Cancer Association of South Africa (CANSA), has been created with the help of cancer patients and survivors and aims to offer practical tips on how to provide emotional, physical, financial and lifestyle support to loved ones with cancer.

Key Considerations:



The person isn't the disease. Don't treat the person like a patient. Let them talk. In fact, encourage them to talk. Even if what they say makes you sad or uncomfortable.



Listen without judgement. Even if you disagree, decisions are ultimately not yours to make. Gently offer your opinion if it's requested, and try not to offer advice.



Be practical: Tangible support like looking after the kids, washing the floors or doing the dishes and laundry counts for a lot.

1 Offering emotional support:

- Stay positive: cancer is as much a battle of the mind as it is the body.
"I needed my family to tolerate me, even when I was feeling down."
- Don't offer unsolicited suggestions like alternative treatments to chemotherapy.
- Be willing to have tough conversations with your loved ones.
"I needed an honest conversation about what lay ahead, and the possible path the cancer would take. Everyone is so kind and wants the best for you, but you are not always given the chance to mourn the loss of your health."
- Take the opportunity to mourn alongside a loved one.
- Take emotional cues and give someone space and privacy when it's requested.
"Sometimes I needed just to be left alone to be in my own space, without always having to pretend to be brave."
- Give plenty of compliments and encouragement.
- Listen, engage, ask questions and offer suggestions - but only if you're asked.
- If a cancer survivor makes a decision with which you disagree, try to be non-judgemental and accepting.
- Arrange counselling if a loved one needs someone outside of family and friends to talk to.
"I would have liked to see a psychologist to deal with the entire process."
- Provide support for a loved one's partner and immediate family, especially the kids.
"They were supporting me, but it was hard for my boy at school."
"I really think my children needed counselling."
- Don't share stories about other cancer patients. These aren't helpful
- Offer to handle phone calls on a loved one's behalf, if they are comfortable with that.
- Accompany them to treatment.
- If a colleague has cancer, consider ways to create an understanding environment by, say, offering a lessened work load when he or she returns to work..
- Consider offering your colleague a lift to and from work.
- Remember, support is still needed after treatments are completed.



"When your treatment is completed, and you are in remission you still experience a range of emotions. People expect you to be fine, but you still need support. It's hard to ask for that support when everyone thinks you should be happy."

2 Consider physical support:

- Keep visits short, as long visits can be tiring.
- Understand and accept the implications of cancer treatment on someone's body.
- Assist with washing and dressing, depending on the closeness of your relationship - don't be embarrassed to offer to help.
"I wish someone could have done my hair every day to help me feel human."
- Offer to run errands.
- Don't try and stop someone from doing something he or she feels capable of doing.
"I wanted my family to allow me to do things if I felt like it, and not stop me from cooking the odd meal."
- Let a loved one decide what his/her body needs.
"My relatives couldn't bear seeing me sleeping all the time. They were scared and did not understand that my body needed to recover from the effects of chemo."
- Offer to accompany someone on regular short walks.
- Assist with exercises prescribed by a doctor or physio.



3 Suggestions around financial support:

- If you can, help to cover medical aid shortfalls and contribute towards medication.
- Donate airtime.
- Start a fundraising group.
"My family raised R110k in four days so that I could begin treatment, as I didn't have medical aid. They raised another R80k for me to complete treatment."
- Offer help to claim against medical aid or insurance policies or find a professional who can help.
- Assist with the administration for claims against medical aid and dread disease cover.
- Contribute towards accommodation if treatments happen far away.
- Buy groceries or financially contribute towards food.
- Look after a loved one's children to help them save on childcare costs.
- Contribute towards a caregiver, if necessary.
- Give toiletries to a loved one.
- Donate money towards petrol or offer to drive a loved one to and from treatment sessions.



"I had to travel 360km every three weeks for my chemotherapy treatments. These travel costs and other expenses add up and even small donations can go a long way to alleviate financial distress."

4 Offering lifestyle support:

- Include and invite loved ones to 'normal' everyday gatherings and events, but don't pressurise them if they prefer not to partake.
"Feeling excluded exacerbated feelings of being an outcast because of my illness"
- Deliver meals that someone will feel like eating. Make sure you check what they do and do not like in their food.
"Not everyone likes tuna, especially with pasta."
"People often brought meals which the family enjoyed, but I couldn't eat because the food was too spicy."
- Provide some kind of distraction or stimulation during chemo.
"I wanted something to do like building puzzles to help pass the hours. I couldn't crotchet or knit with a drip and I didn't feel like concentrating on reading a book."
- Help with post-treatment emotional and physical recovery.
"I've gained a lot of weight. I needed someone to help me work out or to take me to gym."
- While some people may appreciate your offer to help them with exercise or short walks, understand the implications of a compromised immune system.
"Taking a walk was difficult, because I was scared to walk in the streets when my immune system was down."
- Help with the housework like ironing and vacuuming.

