

5 Things You Should Never Say to Someone Who Has Cancer

Someone you know has cancer. You are stunned and at a loss for words. What is the right thing to say or do? I personally battle two types of cancer and have had numerous conversations with people over the past five years who, when hearing I have colorectal cancer and leukemia, have been quick to offer me their take on my situation. Though probably well-intentioned, sometimes their comments have come across as careless, heartless, flippant, arrogant and even accusatory. It's not that people intend to say something wrong, but sometimes we throw out words before they have passed through the filter of "What is a loving and helpful thing to say here?"

Offering counsel to someone who is battling cancer isn't really about being an expert or professional counselor. It's about being a friend. It is also important we empathize with people—which means we need to surmise how they see their condition. Do they see it as a threat or loss? Other people who have processed their situation for a longer period of time may see their diagnosis as a challenge. In each case, words need to be spoken with the utmost care. Here are five things to avoid saying to anyone you encounter who is battling cancer. Avoiding these statements is a practical way to apply Proverbs 15:23 (NIV), "A person finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word."

"I know a woman who had the same thing, and she lived six months after they told her."

I still try to figure out how this is helpful or in what world this could seem like a compassionate thing to say. If you say this—please apologize as soon as possible. Then ask your spouse to smack you, because this statement is unacceptable. One of the challenges of those facing cancer is staying

positive and keeping emotionally healthy. They are more than likely worn out. Statements like this plants negative thoughts, sap energy and paint a bleak future. This statement offers no hope for the hurting.

“You’re just closer to heaven.”

This statement invalidates the person’s cancer and their battle. It demeans the person and their struggle. I would caution you to avoid flippantly throwing Bible verses out to those facing cancer. You need to earn the right to communicate at that level with people. God’s Word is powerful to change and comfort, but when used as a quick-fix pill, you end up insulting the other person.

“Have you tried this diet? You should stay away from ... sugar, dairy and so on.” The person who says this is playing the role of expert, and their words come across as arrogant. Once again, think through your words before you speak them and ask, *Do these sound compassionate? Am I speaking “quick fix” words?*

“You’re going to be stronger for this.”

We don’t know why people go through what they do. We don’t know why some face cancer and others don’t. We don’t know the lessons to be learned. While probably true, this sounds flippant and void of compassion. Don’t be a miserable comforter.

“Don’t feel hopeless.”

Don’t be the feelings police, as if you have authority on appropriate feelings for situations. Instead, encourage the person to express their feelings. Don’t minimize the pain, loss or fear.

Heed the words of Dr. Gary Oliver, “Use tools such as empathy, of caring, of listening, of being there, of being present, sometimes of not even saying anything. These are the tools and

the resources that ... I've seen God use to soften hearts, to bring hope, to transform people."

When you encounter people who battle cancer—and my friends, it's a battle—understand the most effective thing you can do and say is to express and communicate love. When interacting with someone in crisis, you have an incredible opportunity to support and strengthen another person. You can actually give them hope and perspective. So, consider what you do and say.

To be honest, I am most comforted by the words "I love you" and a hug. Perhaps I am not alone.

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For more from Pastor Matt on his cancer journey as well as other "Hope Through Cancer" interviews, listen to the podcasts included with this article!