

Five Things to Never Say to Anyone Who Has Cancer

Perhaps you have had the experience of hearing from someone who shares with you their recent diagnosis of cancer. You are stunned and at a loss of what to say to that person. You wonder in that moment, what is the right thing to say? What is the right thing to do? Often what we say is wrong – wrong – wrong. I have two types of cancer and have had numerous conversations with people over the past five years who, when hearing I have been battling cancer (Colorectal and Leukemia), have been quick to give me their take on my situation. Often their words, probably well-intentioned, instead came across careless, heartless, flippant, arrogant, and even accusatory. It's not that people mean to say anything wrong, but one can flippantly throw out words that have not passed through the filter of "What is a loving and helpful thing to say here?" What to say to someone who is battling cancer isn't really about being an expert or professional counselor. It's about being a friend. To say the right thing does require we think before we speak. It is also important we empathize with people—which means we need to know when people face cancer, and other crises, they see their condition as either a threat or loss; others who have processed their situation for a longer time may see it more as a challenge. In each case, words need to be spoken with the utmost care. I have identified five things to avoid saying to anyone you encounter who is battling cancer. To avoid these statements is a practical way to apply Proverbs 15:23, "*A man finds joy in giving an apt reply- and how good is a timely word.*"

Statements to avoid:

#1 - 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 asap. Then ask your spouse to smack you – because this statement is unacceptable.

#2 –You're just closer to heaven. – So are they if they say it to me again. 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 insult the other person.

#3 – Have you tried this diet? Or similar, *You should stay away from...sugar, dairy etc...* This one draws me inside myself quickly. I cringe when this is said to me. The person who says this is an expert

and their words come across as arrogant. Once again, think through your words before you speak them and ask, “Are these compassionate sounding? Am I speaking “quick fix” words?”

#4 – 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 needed. While probably true, this sounds flippant and void of compassion. Better you just be quiet than throw out this or any other. Don't be a miserable comforter.

#5 – Don't feel hopeless. This makes you the judge and places you in the position of the feelings police. This is the one who is the 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 the many who battle cancer—and my friends, it's a battle—understand the most effective thing you can do and say is to express love and communicate love. When interacting with a 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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