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What to Say to Someone Who’s Sick
By Bruce Feiler, New York Times

My friend sat down and ordered a stiff drink. “I need your help,” she said. “My sister has a brain tumor. I don’t know what to do.”

Three years ago this month, I learned I had bone cancer. That diagnosis led me down a dark year that included nine months of chemotherapy and a 15-hour surgery to reconstruct my left leg.

At the time, my wife, Linda, and I were the parents of 3-years-old twin girls, and we were often overwhelmed. We survived with help from many people. Our siblings organized an online casserole club, so friends could buy us dinner through a meal service. Grandparents rotated in and out of our basement. But as my friend’s query suggested, some gestures were more helpful than others, and a few were downright annoying. So at the risk of offending some well-meaning people, here are six things you should never say to a friend (or relative or colleague) who’s sick, and four things you can always say.

What do patients like to hear? Four suggestions.

1. **Don’t write me back.** All patients get overwhelmed by the burden of keeping everyone informed. Social networking, while offering some relief, often increases the expectation of round-the-clock updates. I appointed a “minister of information,” whose job it was to disseminate news, deflect queries and be polite when I didn’t have the energy to be. But you can do your part: If you do drop off a fruitcake or take the dog for a walk, insist the patient not write you a thank-you note. Chicken soup is not a wedding gift: it shouldn’t come with addressed stress.

2. **I should be going now.** You’ll never go wrong by uttering these five words. Don’t overstay your welcome. Make it 20 minutes, even less if the patient is tired or in pain. While you’re there, wash a few dishes or tidy up the room. Take out the trash when you leave.

3. **Would you like some gossip?** A slight change of topic goes a long way. Patients are often sick of talking about their illnesses. We have to do that with our doctors, nurses and insurance henchmen. By all means, follow the lead of the individual but sometimes ignoring the elephant in the room is just the right medicine. Even someone recovering from surgery has an opinion about the starlet’s affair or the big election coming up.

4. **I love you.** When all else fails, simple, direct emotion is the most powerful gift you can give a loved one going through pain. It doesn’t need to be ornamented. It just needs to be real. “I’m sorry you have to go through this.” “You mean a lot to me.” The fact that so few of us do this makes it even more meaningful.
1. **What can I do to help?** Most patients I know grow to hate this ubiquitous, if heartfelt, question because it puts the burden on them. As Doug Ulman, the chief executive of Livestrong and a three-time cancer survivor, says, “The patient is never going to tell you. They don’t want to feel vulnerable.” Instead, just do something. Want to be really helpful? Clean out my fridge, replace my light bulbs, change my oil.

2. **My thoughts and prayers are with you.** Some people think about you, which is nice. Others pray for you, which is equally comforting. But the majority of people who say they’re sending “thoughts and prayers” are just falling back on a mindless cliché.

3. **Did you try that mango colonic I recommended?** I was stunned by the number of friends and strangers alike who inundated me with tips for miracle tonics, Chinese herbs, etc. At times, my inbox was like a Grand Ole Opry lineup of 1940s Appalachian black magic potions. “If you put turmeric under your fingernails, and pepper on your neck, and take a grapefruit shower, you’ll feel better. It cured my Uncle Louie.”

4. **Everything will be OK.** Unsure what to say, many well-wishers fall back on chirpy feel-goodisms. As one friend who recently had brain surgery complained. “I got a lot of ‘Chin up.’ ‘You’re going to bet better.’ I kept thinking: You haven’t seen the scans. That’s not what the doctor is saying.” Unless you’re a medical professional, resist playing Nostradamus.

5. **How are we today?** Every adult patient I know complains about being infantilized. Writer Letty Cottin Pogrebin who had breast cancer, is working on a book, “How to Be a Friend to a Friend Who’s Sick.” It includes a list of “no-nos” that treat ailing grown-ups like children.

6. **You look great.** Nice try, but patients can see right through this chestnut. We know we’re gaunt, our hair is falling out in clumps, our colostomy bag needs emptying. The only thing this hollow expression conveys is that you’re focusing on how we appear. “When people comment on my appearance,” Linn said, “it reminds me that I don’t look good.”

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