

# An Educational Guide for Friends of Teens with Cancer

By:

A group of inspiring adolescents who have first-hand expertise on cancer and its influence on friendships, Brian Kavanaugh, M.S., Doctoral Student in Clinical Psychology, & The National Children's Cancer Society



"I would say cancer is the most difficult thing any teenager has to go through. It doesn't matter what stage it is, what kind of cancer it is, what the treatment course is, it is HARD. The biggest support a friend can give is just being a shoulder to lean on when times get tough. Even simply asking how the friend is doing is enough to get them through the day. Having cancer as a teenager feels like a chunk of your childhood is being removed, so support and love are really important during treatment."

-Teenage Cancer Survivor

# Introduction

This guide is intended for those teens that have friends that were diagnosed with cancer. We understand that things may be confusing and complicated for you and you may be unsure of what to think, feel or do for your friend. Just the fact that you are opening this guide is impressive because it shows that you are motivated to help your friend. We hope these suggestions are helpful in maintaining your friendship.

Thanks for checking this out!

## To start, let's review some of the basics about cancer

### *Cancer*

- Most of the time, cells in the body that are damaged are either repaired or eventually die. Cancerous cells are damaged cells, except instead of dying or being fixed, they grow and spread uncontrollably. These damaged and "abnormal" cells do damage by traveling to various parts of the body and attacking healthy tissue and organs.
- To remove the cancerous cells, cancer can be treated by chemotherapy, radiation therapy and surgery. Although many teens receive at least one of these treatments, the specific treatment can be very different for various types of cancer.
- Treatments can cause side effects that may limit your friend's ability to play sports, attend a full day of school or do other fun activities. Despite this, they still want to hang out with you like they did before!
- Compared to adults, kids and teens tend to respond better and recover faster from treatment. Improvements in cancer research have resulted in higher recovery rates, short and long term remission and even cures for cancer-related diseases.
- Most importantly, your friend with cancer is still your friend!

## Facts about teenagers . . .

**...even though you probably know more about being a teen than we do!**

- It is common for teens to feel continued closeness to family members although peer friendships may change and become increasingly important.
- Being a teenager can be very stressful and friends can be very helpful resources to get through difficult times. Having friends helps teens feel good.

- Teens with cancer need meaningful friendships just like teens without cancer.
- It is often hard for a teen with cancer and a teen without cancer to maintain a friendship because of the demands of cancer treatment, the physical and emotional effects it has on the teen, and the reactions it can cause in those individuals without cancer.

### **Some potential causes to changes in friendships during cancer treatment:**

- Friends' limited understanding of cancer
- A lack of communication between friends

## **So why did we make this guide?**

**To help teens learn more about cancer and what kind of support their friend with cancer wants and needs.**



# Facts from teenagers

## ***Friends***

- The majority of survivors state they are currently satisfied with friendships although they also reported that they were not satisfied with friendships during cancer treatment
- 88% said that the amount of *time* spent with friends and peers significantly decreased when cancer treatment began but only 41% stated that the amount of *friends* decreased
  - This suggests that while teens didn't necessarily lose friends, they spent less time with them

## ***Friends' Behaviors***

- 85% reported that there were certain things their friends did that were enjoyed or appreciated
- 52% also reported that there were certain things their friends did that were *not* enjoyed or appreciated
- Over 66% of teens reported that the *most* important thing their friends did was visit and just "hang out"
- 63% reported that talking on the phone or chatting online were the *least* important things friends did
- **88% think friends were doing a good job during cancer treatment**

The remaining information provided in this guide is from the active contributions of teens that had a first hand experience with cancer. They provided information on their experiences as well as invaluable tips and suggestions for friends without cancer.

## ***Friends' Understanding***

- 42% said their friends did not have a good understanding of cancer and only 6% said their friends had an excellent understanding
- Only 20% reported that their friends were educated on cancer and its effects on teens
- More than 66% believed if their friends had a better understanding of cancer, their behaviors would have been better
- **97% think friends without cancer should be better educated about cancer and the effects it has on friendships**
- The most important topic to educate friends are ways they can help during cancer treatment

# The Good & Bad

## NOT Appreciated

- Talked about things that made me feel sad and left out such as discussing partying or big plans they're planning to do together
- Did not visit me
- Judged me and stopped contacting me
- Used my cancer to get pity from others
- Made false assumptions about cancer because they did not know enough about it or its effects



## Appreciated!

- Visited me at the hospital to watch television, play video games, talk or just "hang out"
- Called, texted, online chatted, tweeted, posted, wrote letters or sent care packages
- Organized larger events, such as town benefits, high school events or birthday parties
- Helped me with simple things around my hospital room, helped with homework and brought me good food
- Generally tried to treat me as normal as possible, while also giving genuine support and love



# Be A Friend

- Make sure they know you are there for them
- Show support throughout treatment, not just at the beginning
- Ask them simple questions, such as “How are you feeling?” Be supportive when they provide honest answers (when they share how sick they feel)
- Visit, hang out and just spend time with them
- Try to treat them as normal as possible, do regular activities, but also understand their limitations
- Address the topic of cancer; do not just ignore it. Ask questions, talk about it and learn so you can be more involved in your friend’s life
- Keep them updated on school events without going overboard and making them feel left out
- Show support but don’t pity them



# In Their Own Words

## What was the hardest part about going through cancer treatment during adolescence?

*"The fact that everybody else was going out and being active, such as going out with friends on Friday nights, and I was stuck at home. I was also an athlete, which made things harder to adjust to, instead of going to practice everyday, and having fun with my friends, I laid on the couch due to my constant headaches."* Scott



## What was it like to return to school after cancer treatment?

*"It was rewarding to go back to school however, I felt like everyone was staring and talking about me. Self-consciousness was a huge issue in my transition."* Sarah

## What can friends do to support their friends with cancer?

*"Just be there. Try to remember that they are still the same person; they are just facing something huge in their life right now. Go visit them in the hospital. Be ok with not being as active... Opt for movie nights! Don't stop being there for them. Your friend will love you for it, and your friendship will be so much stronger."* Kate



## What was it like to return to school after cancer treatment?

*"It was strange, I was also starting 7<sup>th</sup> grade in a new school, but once I explained what I had and what was wrong, they accepted me and everyone was supportive of me."* Jim

# In Their Own Words

**What would be the most important thing to tell a friend of an adolescent with cancer?**

*"To just be there for their friend if they need to talk, or if they need emotional support. Support, family, and friends are the most important things during this hard time." Jim*

**What are activities that friends should avoid or things that are not appreciated by adolescents with cancer?**

*"Activities that can be done while sitting are generally better than ones that may cause physical exhaustion. Because of radiation and/or chemo it is unpredictable how a patient feels physically. If a physical activity is presented to the cancer patient and they are unable to do it they may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable." Sarah*



**Why do you think it is important to educate friends of adolescents with cancer on the effects of cancer and the ways they can support their friends during this time?**

*"Going through cancer is hard. Losing friends over it because they don't understand what you're going through is even harder. I know that some of my friends were scared initially to be around me, as if they would "get sick" themselves. Others didn't want to deal with the fact that my cancer was real, and they didn't know what to do to help me. It would have been so wonderful to give them something they could read... and understand!" Kate*



**Why do you think it is important to educate friends of adolescents with cancer on the effects of cancer and the ways they can support their friends during this time?**

*"Friends of adolescents with cancer are typically uninformed about the whole process of cancer. Such as the procedures and cautions that are put in place for the adolescent that was diagnosed with cancer." Scott*

# Show You Care

While we provided suggestions on how to help a friend with cancer, it is also important to understand that all teens with cancer are different. One teen may dislike an activity, while another teen may love it. You know your friend with cancer better than we do.

Here is a list of things to consider:

- Show an early interest in learning about cancer and the ways it may affect your friend. Demonstrate to them that you want to be involved as much as possible, but that you will also respect their privacy if they don't want to talk about some things or cannot hangout on certain days.
- Teens may want to be kept updated on gossip at school or the activities that are happening in class, but talking too much about fun parties and plans may also make them feel left out. This may seem difficult to understand so the best thing to do is to talk with your friend and find out what he/she wants to hear.
- Ask your friend what you can do to help them through the process and make sure to LISTEN. They may say they want something early in treatment, but this may change at any point. Keep checking in with your friend on the things you are doing.
- This may seem like a lot of responsibility for you. It may be helpful to have other friends involved to help you feel more comfortable in this process.
- Participants continuously reported that visiting was much more powerful and important than secondary communication such as texting or online chatting. Try to be physically present for your friend whenever possible. Texting and online communication are great tools to stay in touch, but use them as secondary means to be a friend whenever possible
- We know visiting a friend may make you feel anxious, nervous or uncomfortable, but know that visiting them probably makes their day a lot better. Try to treat your friend as "normal" as possible. Telling old jokes, talking about common interests and treating them in the same way will help you both feel comfortable and normal.

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