



**A friend has been diagnosed with breast cancer, and I'm not sure how I should react. Is there anything to bear in mind?**

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**I**n our lifetime, each of us will have at least one loved come face to face with cancer. If you are unsure of what to do or are worried about saying the wrong thing you're not alone. My insights are based on my professional experience as a counsellor as well as the voices of two of my closest girlfriends who fought breast cancer.

■ **When she has just got diagnosed.** At the initial stages your friend is dealing with the news herself. She may not want to talk about it. Don't run in to hug her, share stories of your aunt who had breast cancer, the sure cure of the 'organic' diet, or avoid her due to your own sense of discomfort. If you feel awkward, it is better to be

upfront and share that while you do not know what to say, you deeply care about what is happening to her and are there for her. Do be sensitive and don't let your curiosity take over. My friend shared that "90% of the people who called or came by wanted to find out which of my breasts had the cancer. I always wondered what difference it made to them!"

Depending on the personality and life situation, your friend could get angry and bitter when initially diagnosed. You could become a target of this negative energy. It's not personal. This is not about you. Know that she is going through a life-altering situation; she may be in physical pain, and be very confused with all the treatment options. Be patient and non-judgemental. Give her time, all the while letting her know that you are with her.

■ **When she does not want to talk about it.** As her cancer progresses and she is getting treatment, you may sense that she does not want to talk about how she is doing. This could be because she is looking to you to 'normalize' her life. She might rather reminisce down memory lane, as you share a few laughs about your college days, gossiping about others or just doing a fun lunch together. My friend would often share with me that she hated it when people would come to visit her with a sombre face, like it was a funeral service! Remember, your friend is more than just a 'cancer patient'.



Being a good friend means reminding her of that too.

■ **When she has lost her hair, put on weight and has a mastectomy.** Losing one's hair and putting on weight is a harsh reality of the treatment. They are everyday reminders of cancer. Everyone copes in different ways; some may be more affected than others. If you sense that your friend is upset, do acknowledge her loss so she feels heard. Avoid trivializing it by saying it does not matter, that her hair will grow back or even who cares how fat she looks.

Your friend might intellectually know that undergoing a mastectomy

is the right thing to do, however this is still emotionally a hard choice to make. 'Losing' her breast could adversely affect her body image, sex drive, and confidence. Acknowledge this with her, be a sounding board for

her fears, and go shopping with her to get post-mastectomy bras! The bottom line is there is no 'one size fits all' approach; the best starting point is to start from where your friend is. If she has included you in this tumultuous part of her life journey, it is your privilege to be there for her.

My friend aptly put it, 'I just want you to be real with me and let me be real with you'. ▣

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