



A GUIDE CREATED BY CANCER SURVIVORS

Written by

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# Cancer Crash Course:

## Bonus Guide For Friends and Family

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*This eBook is dedicated to my amazing parents, Bill and Monica Hickman. Thank you for everything you've done for me over the past 31 years – you rock.*

*A special thanks also goes to Betsy and Lyndsay for your stellar editing work – much appreciated!*

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## Chapter 1: Start Here

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**F**amily and friends often need advice on supporting the people in their lives that get cancer – and most of the information out there is geared towards the cancer patients themselves, not to the people, like you, that make up their support systems.

Maybe you don't know the "right thing to say" to a friend with cancer.

Maybe you just found out that your spouse has cancer – what should you be doing for them?

Or maybe you live far away and want to be a meaningful part of someone's support system while they fight cancer, but you're just not sure how to do that...

This guide focuses on what family and friends can do when someone they care about has cancer. You know the saying about children, "It takes a village to raise a child"? The same goes for someone that has cancer – it takes a village of doctors, nurses, friends, family, and of course, the person with cancer to win the battle against cancer.

First and foremost, keep in mind that more than anything, most people with cancer want to be treated the same way they were treated before they were sick.

They don't want their friends and family to tip-toe around them. They also don't want to be treated like they have the plague.

Why?

Because when people act differently around them, it serves as a constant reminder that something is wrong with them. This constant reminder, then, has the negative effect of making the person feel like they are being controlled by the cancer – when instead they should be focusing on the idea that **THEY** are in charge and in the pilot's seat – not the cancer.

The power of positive thinking is unlimited for people battling cancer. Will positive thinking single-handedly cure them of their disease? Not likely. But modern medicine coupled with positive thinking goes a lot farther than medicine alone. Do your part to promote positive thinking by acting like the same old sister or spouse or best friend that you were before cancer came into the picture.

Now that we've established that ground rule, let's get a little more specific on what you can do to be a meaningful part of someone's support system when they are fighting cancer.

### **Advice for Partners and Spouses**

If your partner or spouse has been diagnosed with cancer, you might be feeling just as overwhelmed as your significant other. The instant you find out your spouse has cancer, your role changes - and you no doubt experience a roller-coaster of emotions ranging from strength to despair to guilt. Cancer caregivers often feel like they are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. It can be hard for anyone to know the "right things" to do or say to a person with cancer. Check out these words of wisdom provided by other men and women who have been in your shoes as a starting point:

"Take one day and one moment at a time."

- *Veronica from Canton, OH, United States*

"At first, I couldn't stop feeling guilty. Not that I had done anything to cause her to get cancer, but because I couldn't do more to help her get better. I would have given anything to switch places with her – I wanted to fight the cancer for her.

After a while, I realized that feeling guilty wasn't doing anything to help the situation, so I put that behind me and focused on something I really did have control over – staying positive and making sure she knew I was going to be there for her every step of the way."

- *Dave from Omaha, NE, United States*

"My wife was really upset about losing her hair. She hated wearing wigs and hats, but she didn't want anyone seeing her bald – including me! That really bothered me because we had always had a rock solid relationship, and I couldn't understand why she wouldn't let me see her without hair – it's just hair. Finally, it occurred to me that arguing with her about letting me see her bald wasn't doing either one of us any good. So I shaved my head. A few days later, she came out of the bathroom without anything on her head, and I knew then the true power of the phrase 'If you can't beat them, join them!'"

*- Stan from Maple Grove, MN, United States*

"When my husband was diagnosed with an advanced stage of cancer, we knew the odds were not in his favor. We stayed positive, though, and made the most of our time together. We talked and laughed and made more memories in the last five months of his life than we had in our sixteen years of marriage. I hate that he's gone and that it took something like cancer to bring out the best in our relationship, but I'm thankful that we made the most of those last five months together."

*- Cindy from Jacksonville, FL, United States*

"This might be a little blunt, but I'm going to come right out and talk about it because it's one of the things I wondered about when my girlfriend was first diagnosed with cancer – having intercourse during chemo treatments. There's a good chance your partner is not going to be in the mood to have intercourse during chemo. So don't push it. And let her know that it's okay that she's not in the mood. Also, if your partner IS in the mood while going through chemo, then get one of those lube products because – well, just trust me on that one."

*- Joe from Chicago, IL, United States*

"My wife is a survivor of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Having children is something we always wanted to do, but we found out that because of the treatments she went through, she is unable to get pregnant. At first we were both devastated...but then we decided that instead of being upset, we should focus on finding a solution. We recently adopted two wonderful little boys from Russia, and we couldn't be happier. I guess my advice to others out there is to be open to alternative ways to bring children into your family if cancer causes your significant other to become infertile...there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

- James from Vancouver, BC, Canada

Understand that if you are in a married or serious relationship and one of you gets cancer, **in a mental sense both of you have cancer**. For couples, cancer is a "we" thing. You know how couples say, "We're having a baby?" Obviously, only one person is going to physically "have" the baby – but it is an emotionally significant event for both people. If you are in a relationship and one of you gets cancer, only the person diagnosed with cancer has to deal with the physical aspects of it, but both of you have to deal with the emotional repercussions.

## Advice for Friends

Your friend has cancer. **Now what?**

When I got cancer at the age of twenty-seven, it was obvious that some of my friends were at a total loss for words when I told them the news. Not surprising, really – it can be difficult to know the "right" things to say when a friend has cancer – especially if you've never been in their shoes.

Here are some tips to get you pointed in the right direction:

- **Don't feel like you need to know exactly what to say.** Your friend isn't looking for you to relate to them – more than anything, they just want you to acknowledge that they have cancer. Something as simple as "I really don't know what to say, but I'm here for you" fits the bill just fine.

Or if you're really at a loss for words, using a single swear word of your choice might be appropriate. I remember the reaction of a close friend of mine when I told her I had cancer. She looked at me with her eyebrows furrowed and said "sh\*t" in that way people say swear words when they really mean it. I'm not a proponent of incorporating swearing into everyday conversation, however, I do believe there is a time and place for everything. And finding out your friend has cancer is one of those times.

- **You don't have to mention the "c-word" (cancer) every time you see or talk to your friend.** This kind of goes back to the point I made on the first page of this chapter – try your hardest to treat your friend the same way you did before they had cancer. Your friend will probably fill you in on his cancer treatments if there is anything he feels like sharing – if he doesn't mention it, then move the conversation along by telling him about your latest vacation or asking about his dog.
- **On the same token, don't be afraid to talk about cancer with your friend.** If your friend has cancer, she may want to share with you what she is going through and how the treatments are progressing. Listen to your friend, and ask questions if you have them.
- **Do not start any conversation by asking "How are you feeling?"** This is a pet peeve of mine, and I'll explain why: when a person is going through cancer treatments, he's never going to feel "just peachy". Never. As such, more appropriate questions might be, "How are the treatments going?" or "How many chemo treatments do you have left?" And try to work these questions into the conversation once it has already started – not as your opening greeting to the person.
- **If your friend has cancer, they do not want to hear about someone else you know that has or had cancer.** If they do want to know, they'll ask. There is a caveat to this one, however; you can use your past experiences of knowing others that have had cancer to relate to your friend. For example, you can say, "When my aunt had cancer, I went with her to a couple of her chemo appointments. If you'd like me to go with you to any of your treatments, I'd be more than happy to keep you company."

- **Don't say, "I know how you feel."** No, you don't. Not even if you had the same type of cancer in the past do you know exactly how your friend feels – every person handles situations differently, so there's no way to know how someone is feeling at that moment. End of story.
- **Do not disappear off the face of the earth.** A couple of my friends disappeared completely when they found out I had cancer. I knew that they knew I was sick, so after a month or so, I began to wonder why they hadn't at least emailed me to acknowledge that I had cancer. I have to admit – it really hurt me because I felt like they didn't care. Here I was, facing the biggest challenge of my life, and they weren't even cheering me on from the fringes.

It wasn't until later, when I was almost done with cancer treatments, that I found out why one friend in particular had been M.I.A. I got a long letter from her in the mail. In it, she apologized for never acknowledging that I was sick – and she explained that she had acted that way because her father had died of cancer when she was younger; and the thought of someone younger than her and seemingly healthy getting cancer had terrified her so much that she had simply avoided contacting me. It was easier.

I understood her fear, and, of course, I forgave her. But let this be a lesson to you – if you're scared because your friend has cancer, be strong and face the situation. You'll be glad you did.

- **Your friend is in remission. Yea! What now? Celebrate with her** – and then move on. She will, and she will want everyone else to move on, too.

Even now almost four years into remission, I run into people and some ask me, "How are you feeling?" with that special inflection in their voice. When they say it that way, I know exactly what they are thinking:

*"There's Ali. She had cancer. How horrible."*

Yep, it was horrible, but now it's over. Like my mother says, "Cancer is a word – not a sentence." In other words, cancer will always be a part of your friend's past, but it will never define them as a person.

## Chapter 2: Bring on the Presents

**F**lowers are lovely – and most people love getting flowers. But if you want to be more original, here are some suggestions of gifts for cancer patients and spirit-boosting ideas:

- **Offer to go along for the chemo treatment.** Chemo treatments are rather boring. You just sit there and let the drugs drip, drip, drip. This can take hours. Even if you can't go for the duration of the treatment, offer to go for a couple of hours – having someone there to chat with besides the nurses and other cancer patients is a welcome change. Plus, maybe your friend's spouse or close relative would like a break from being on constant duty – this is good way to give that person a break, too.
- **Chemo day presents.** This is something my very creative aunt did for me when I was going through chemo treatments, and I loved it! On the days I had a chemo treatment scheduled, she would bring a small gift over to my house – it was usually waiting for me right outside the front door when I returned home from the hospital. It was never anything big or expensive – it didn't need to be – just little gifts that she knew I'd like. Candy, bottles of lotion, funky pens to write with, books, whatever.

This is also an easy thing to do if you live far away from your friend with cancer – you can send packages three days or so before her treatments with instructions to open on chemo day!

- **Milestone celebrations.** Find out when your friend's last chemo or radiation treatment is scheduled for – and then organize a dinner or throw a party a week later to help them celebrate reaching that milestone!

My Chicago friends threw me a "Cancer-Free" party about a month after my doctor told me I was in remission – and that's something I will always remember them doing. It meant a lot to me that they wanted to help mark the occasion.

Make sure you ask your friend before organizing a Milestone Party – he may not feel up to being the center of attention. If that's the case, then resort to one of the other ideas mentioned here.

- **Send flowers.** Now, I know I just said that getting flowers for someone with cancer is unoriginal...BUT if that person absolutely adores irises, then make her day! Send irises! Any gesture that you put thought into will be very much appreciated by your friend.
- **Make dinner.** This is especially appropriate if the person who has cancer has a family to feed. Cancer treatments can leave one feeling rather exhausted (and sometimes downright sick), so making a meal for her family is the last thing she wants to do. Take over lasagna and a loaf of garlic bread, and you'll be seen as a savior in the eyes of your friend – and her family!
- **Send a care package or thoughtful gift.** This is a great idea if you live far away from the person fighting cancer. Put together a care package of things the person likes: books, magazines, candy, etc. and send it to their home.

Even better, if you know your friend has a special interest or hobby, cater to that – for example, my friends know that I love wine. I got four shipments of wine delivered to me throughout my treatments from different friends around the country (I really like wine). And even though I couldn't drink wine during various parts of my treatment, I still really appreciated the gesture – and I got to drink it later when I was feeling better!

- **Spa / Massage Gift Certificates.** Massages, facials, and other similar pampering is one of the best ways for anyone to relax – especially if you are going through cancer treatments. There's just something about a spa pedicure or massage that whisks you away from reality for awhile, and that is a very welcome experience if you're fighting cancer. If you're looking for a gift that serves the mind, body, and spirit, a spa gift certificate is definitely your best bet.

## Chapter Three: Do Your Part

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**O**ne of the best things you can do to help your friend or family member fight cancer is to educate yourself on the type of cancer she has and take action to raise money for organizations that fund support and research for that type of cancer. More than anything, this will show her that you want to do everything you can to **fight right along with her**.

### Resources for Cancer Information

There are many cancer resources out there, and it can be overwhelming to dig through all of them to find information about a specific type of cancer. Below are the names and websites of some of the most high-quality, easy to understand cancer information resources available. Browse through them to find information about a specific type of cancer and its existing courses of treatment.

#### Mayo Clinic

[www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)

The website for the Mayo Clinic provides a wealth of information about cancers and treatments. The descriptions are easy to follow, and there is even information about clinical trials and research being conducted for each type of cancer.

#### American Cancer Society

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

The American Cancer Society is another reputable information source. Just click on the link under "Learn About Cancer" to start your search. You have the option of reading an overview about the cancer or a detailed guide that contains extensive medical information.

## National Cancer Institute

[www.cancer.gov](http://www.cancer.gov)

The National Cancer Institute's alphabetical list of cancers contains a very comprehensive list of cancers and an abundance of information about each one – but it's a little less easy to navigate than the two resources I listed above. Still, it contains a lot of good information.

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## Cancer Charities and Organizations

Cancer charities and organizations dedicated to cancer research and education are working everyday to raise funds to fight cancer, and many of their websites contain valuable information about the cancer journey. Every one of the organizations listed here has a slightly different mission, but they are all working towards the same goal – to find a cure!

### American Cancer Society

[www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org)

The American Cancer Society is one of the biggest cancer charities and support organizations in the United States. Currently, it boasts more than two million volunteers. Its mission is to prevent cancer and save lives by funding research, advocacy, education, and service. Check out three of this organization's biggest fundraising events:

#### Daffodil Days

Who doesn't love daffodils? Every spring, volunteers offer daffodils in exchange for donations that go to fund the organization's programs and services. Consider becoming a volunteer for next year's Daffodil Days!

#### Relay for Life

[www.relayforlife.org](http://www.relayforlife.org)

Are you a night owl? Relay for Life is one party of a fundraising event! Teams camp out at the event site all night, and the idea is to have at least one team member walking on the track throughout the event. This event celebrates survivorship and raises funds for cancer research and programs.

### **Making Strides Against Breast Cancer**

If you prefer non-competitive events, this is the one for you. Making Strides Against Breast Cancer is the organization's annual event to support breast cancer awareness and research.

The events listed above are just some of the fundraising events that the American Cancer Society organizes each year. Join the fight, and check out their website for a complete listing of fund-raising events. ([www.cancer.org](http://www.cancer.org))

### **Avon Foundation**

[www.avonfoundation.org](http://www.avonfoundation.org)

The Avon Breast Cancer Walk is not for the faint of heart - you walk 39 miles over two days! A good friend of mine participated in this walk, and she can't stop talking about what an incredible experience it was. The proceeds from these walks go to funding research for breast cancer and to helping those with little or no health insurance receive breast cancer screening and treatments.

### **Beautiful Lengths**

[www.Pantene.com/BeautifulLengths](http://www.Pantene.com/BeautifulLengths)

Beautiful Lengths is an organization sponsored by Pantene. It uses donated beautiful, healthy-looking hair to create free wigs for women who have lost their hair due to cancer treatment. Hilary Swank was the first to donate a ponytail to this organization – if hair is your thing, consider supporting this worthy cause!

### City of Hope

[www.cityofhope.org](http://www.cityofhope.org)

City of Hope is where the magic happens – this is where over 300 doctors and scientists go to work every day for the sole purpose of finding the causes of and cures for cancer and other evil diseases. It's located in Duarte, California. And guess how long it's been around? Since 1913!

### CureSearch

[www.curesearch.org](http://www.curesearch.org)

Through their mission to find cures for childhood cancer, CureSearch unites the world's largest childhood cancer research organization, the Children's Oncology Group, and the National Childhood Cancer Foundation. Research is the main focus of this wonderful organization.

### First Descents

[www.firstdescents.org](http://www.firstdescents.org)

This is a super cool organization – I first heard about it through a friend of mine. First Descents finances and organizes outdoor adventures (think whitewater rafting, rock climbing, kayaking, etc.) for young adults with cancer. The adventures also include activities that help participants deal with the emotional and psychological consequences of a cancer diagnosis.

### Leukemia and Lymphoma Society

[www.lls.org](http://www.lls.org)

The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society is probably my "favorite" of the cancer charities simply because without it, it's very likely I wouldn't be here today! This organization is dedicated to curing leukemia, lymphoma, Hodgkin's disease, and myeloma – in other words, they want to get rid of blood cancers, once and for all!

Here are some details on four of their biggest fundraising events:

### **Hike for Discovery**

[www.hikefordiscovery.org](http://www.hikefordiscovery.org)

Are you a nature lover? Hike for Discovery might be your cup of tea! Join a chapter (there are currently 30 locations across the country) and train with other chapter members. After four to five months of training, you'll travel to your hike destination, which includes places like the Grand Canyon, Kauai and Yosemite. Hike for Discovery proceeds go to fund research for treatments and cures for leukemia, lymphoma, myeloma and Hodgkin's lymphoma; patient assistance programs; government advocacy; community outreach; and education programs.

### **Light the Night Walks**

[www.lightthenight.org](http://www.lightthenight.org)

These are two to three mile walks organized by the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. The proceeds from the Light The Night Walks fund research for treatments and cures for leukemia, lymphoma, myeloma and Hodgkin's lymphoma; patient assistance programs; government advocacy; community outreach; and education programs.

### **Team in Training**

[www.teamintraining.org](http://www.teamintraining.org)

Team in Training is a program that helps you train for a marathon, half marathon, triathlon or century bike ride – all while raising funds for The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. If you've always wanted to complete a big race but just need a little shove to actually go out and do it, Team in Training is the charity event for you!

### **The Leukemia Cup Regatta**

[www.leukemia-lymphoma.org/regatta](http://www.leukemia-lymphoma.org/regatta)

Is sailing your niche? Consider participating in The Leukemia Cup Regatta organized by The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society to raise funds for treatments and cures for leukemia, lymphoma, myeloma and Hodgkin's lymphoma; patient assistance programs; government advocacy; community outreach; and education programs.

### **The National Children's Cancer Society**

[www.nationalchildrenscancersociety.com](http://www.nationalchildrenscancersociety.com)

Based in St. Louis, Missouri, The National Children's Cancer Society is dedicated to helping children with cancer and their families. Their big fundraising event is the Annual Walk for the Children. Funds raised by this organization go to provide advocacy, support services, and education, as well as financial aid and in-kind assistance.

### **Livestrong Lance Armstrong Foundation**

[www.livestrong.org](http://www.livestrong.org)

Lance Armstrong, the infamous road racing cyclist, founded the Livestrong Lance Armstrong Foundation in 1997 after battling cancer. Check out his website for many, many ways to get involved in the fight against cancer. His story is one of the most inspiring I've ever read!

### **Liz's Legacy**

[www.lizlegacy.com](http://www.lizlegacy.com)

Liz's Legacy is a charitable organization founded in August 2003 by the family of Liz Karnes. Liz died after a 12-year fight with ovarian cancer in April 2003. The organization supports cancer research, patient care, and education at the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Eppley Cancer Center.

## Skin Cancer Foundation

[www.skincancer.org](http://www.skincancer.org)

The Skin Cancer Foundation was founded in 1979 for the purpose of educating the public and medical professionals about skin cancer. The funds they raise go to education, research and medical training.

## Susan G. Komen for the Cure

[www.komen.org](http://www.komen.org)

Susan G. Komen for the Cure was started by Nancy Brinker in 1982. Nancy had made a promise to her dying sister, Susan Komen, to do whatever it took to end breast cancer forever. I am amazed at how much Nancy's organization has accomplished since its inception. It is now the largest grassroots network in the world dedicated to fighting breast cancer.

Here is some information on two of their biggest fundraising events, The Breast Cancer 3-Day and Race for the Cure:

### The Breast Cancer 3-Day

[www.the3day.org](http://www.the3day.org)

The Breast Cancer 3-Day is organized by Susan G. Komen for the Cure, and the funds raised from this event are used to support breast cancer research, treatment, education and screening.

It's a sixty mile walk over the course of three days – so you've got to be in shape for this one!

I can say from first-hand experience that this event is a life-changing experience. I participated as a walker at the Washington D.C. event in October 2008, and you can [read about my experience](#) on the Practical Cancer Guide website.

### **Race for the Cure**

Is a 5k run or walk more your style? The Race for the Cure events might be the way to go. With as many event sites as they have around the country, there's bound to be one within driving distance of where you live. Funds raised through Race for the Cure are used to support breast cancer research, treatment, education and screening.

### **The V Foundation for Cancer Research**

[www.jimmyv.org](http://www.jimmyv.org)

The V Foundation for Cancer Research was started in 1993 by ESPN and Jim Valvano, the former North Carolina State basketball coach and broadcaster. Since its inception, this organization has raised more than \$80M and awarded cancer research grants in 38 states.

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Obviously, the list of cancer charities and organizations I've included in this section does not include every organization out there working to raise money and awareness. This list was meant to serve as a starting point for you as you embark upon your quest to join the fight against cancer. Do some research and find an organization that speaks to you and your goals – there's something for everyone out there!



Thank you so much for reading my eBook!

I hope you found some of the tips and information I included in this guide helpful. I appreciate you taking the time out of your day to read this, and if you have a second, I would love to hear what you think about it.

Please leave a comment on my blog, or if you'd rather send me a private email message, my address is listed below. I read each and every comment and email, so don't hesitate to contact me!

Thanks again!



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