TIPS: What To Do and Say

When someone you love (or know) is going through a breast cancer diagnosis

You may meet or know people (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) who were diagnosed with breast cancer and you may not know what to do or what to say to them. This resource provides information and tips on how you can provide emotional support to someone after a breast cancer diagnosis. By giving them support, they may feel loved, cared for and understood. You may also feel like you’re doing something to help them.

Not sure how to start a conversation?

Try this: “I’ve been thinking about you and wanted to check in to see how you’re doing. If you’d like to talk about it, I’m here for you.”

Techniques and skills for emotional support

ACTIVE LISTENING
Active listening is using focused listening skills. This can help you understand a person’s thoughts and feelings.

• Be fully present, don’t interrupt. Allow them to complete their thoughts.
• Ask questions, open-ended ones if possible.
• Resist placing judgment.

Example: Say - “I am sorry you’re going through this. Would you like to talk or just have me be there for you?”
If the person would like to talk, you could say “Tell me more.” You can also ask follow-up questions like “What do you think about that?” or “How does that make you feel?”

PARTIALIZING
Partializing is taking an overall problem and breaking it up into smaller, more manageable pieces. This can make a big problem seem less overwhelming.

Example: “It sounds like you have a lot going on at once. It’s probably overwhelming to think about it all. How can I help you? Or “What feels most important in this moment?”

STORIES OF SUPPORT
Strength comes in numbers.
Go to komen.org/share-your-story to read stories of hope and encouragement from others. We invite you to share your story to inspire, comfort and support others.

SOCIAL SUPPORT
In this resource, we focused on emotional support. To learn more about social support, check out these resources on komen.org:

• Co-Survivors – How to help those you care about cope with breast cancer brochure
• komen.org/cosurvivor
• https://www.komen.org/support-resources/support/
Techniques and skills for emotional support
(Continued)

REFLECTION
Reflective listening is hearing and understanding and then letting
the other person know they’re being heard and understood. Try not
to interpret what they’re saying, but instead, reflect back on what
you’re hearing.

Example: “It sounds like you’re feeling <insert the specific thing
they mentioned.” “I’m here if you want to talk.” Or “I hear your
concerns.”

ACKNOWLEDGING
Acknowledging involves respecting their story by commenting on
what they’ve shared.
• Convey empathy and understanding.
• The tone of your voice has a powerful effect and can show care
and concern.
• Nonverbal cues like eye contact, leaning in and head nodding can
also show care and concern.

Example: Saying, “I’m so sorry you’re going through this.” Or “That
must be difficult.” This may be enough to convey this respect and
acknowledgment. You could ask, “How can I help?”

VALIDATION AND NORMALIZATION
Validation and normalization are very similar. Validation recognizes
and accepts a person’s feelings. It explains the way they’re feeling is
common and expected (in most cases). What they say has validity
(or meaning).

Example: “I just feel so overwhelmed and don’t know what to do!”
You: “It’s okay to feel that way. Being diagnosed with breast cancer
is a lot to process. It makes sense that you’re unsure about what to
do next. How can I help?”

Normalization assures them their feelings and reactions are normal.
It’s important to provide this reassurance.

Example: “Since my diagnosis, I’ve just shut down. I don’t know what
to do or say. I’m just sad.”
You: “This sounds like a normal response to very difficult news. I
would imagine many people feel this same way. You’re not alone. I’m
here to help.”

SUMMARIZING
Summarizing is when you both review the conversation you’ve had
and discuss actions you can take together. It may help to write
these down.

Example: “It sounds like the most important thing to you right now
is <insert what you’ve talked about>. Would you like me to help you
figure out some next steps and people who can help?”

THE KOMEN PATIENT
CARE CENTER’S BREAST
CARE HELPLINE
at 1-877 GO KOMEN (1-877-
465-6366) is a great first
place to get help and support.
Our helpline provides free,
professional support services
to anyone who has questions
or concerns about breast
 cancer, including people
diagnosed with breast cancer
and their families.
The Helpline is available
Monday through Thursday,
9 a.m. to 7 p.m. ET and
Friday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. ET
Please refer to the Patient Care
Center for more information.
The Helpline staff speak
English and Spanish.