



beyond “i’m sorry”

## SUPPORTING A FAMILY FACING CANCER

### We’ve all been there:

frozen in a stand-still when we hear a piece of devastating news from someone we know or love. The encounter can be awkward and messy, mostly because we don’t know what to do or say, even if we’ve experienced a similar circumstance. Suddenly, we lose all of our words, break into a sweat and say something like this: “I can’t imagine what you’re going through,” “I’m so sorry,” or “Let me know if you need anything.” These aren’t bad things to say, but it doesn’t feel right, because we want to say or do something more.

In this guide, we’ll help you do the following:

- Provide ideas on how to support a family and where to start
- Give you an inside perspective on caring ways to communicate
- Show real-life examples of encouraging words and the things better left unsaid
- Help you write the perfect card to a family
- Give a list of great resources to help you connect at the next level

When we don’t know how to react, we’re tempted to avoid the relationship so we don’t say or do the wrong thing. This guide will give you the tools to help connect with compassion and authenticity so you can let a family in need of support feel understood and cared for.



## 10+ WAYS TO SUPPORT A FAMILY FACING CANCER

Families experiencing medical crises, like cancer, need support and encouragement as they go through what could be the most challenging time in their lives. If you feel compelled to help, know that your thoughtfulness could be a huge stress relief that's remembered for a lifetime.

Not sure what to say or do? You're not alone. We've compiled a list of 10+ ways to support a family experiencing a challenging medical crisis so you'll no longer have to rely on saying, "If there's anything I can do, let me know."



*Caiah (left), leukemia survivor, with family*



Griffin, Ewing sarcoma survivor, with dad

## 1. Bring a meal.

Making a main meal is a huge time-saver for a family. If the family has a large community circle, they may get several of the same meals in any given week. Try making your own favorite dish to help mix it up while helping the family eat healthily and stay nourished. Remember to ask about food allergies or special diets. You can even set up a [meal calendar](#) for a family so they know when and who is bringing them a meal.

### Where to start

Text or call the family member and tell them what you have in mind. Casseroles, crockpot meals, soups or stews are a great first meal to bring. Before dropping off a meal, let the family know you're coming so they can tell you the best time to leave it. Ideally, make a meal that can be frozen, package it in containers that you don't need back (so the family doesn't have to worry about returning them) and make sure to include instructions.

### Bonus

Buy the family a cooler to keep outside their door. If they're given a lot of meals and are in and out of the house, you've provided a consistent place to put the food.

“After getting home from school, it was so nice to be able grab the meal from the cooler and not have to think about it. I could focus on what was most important to me at the time.”

– Alli, sister of a childhood cancer patient

## 2. Run errands.

Picking up and doing laundry, returning library books, picking up prescriptions, bringing mail to the post office or grabbing the mail from the mailbox, stocking up the fridge, ordering lunch: these errands are great ways to help a family save time and clear their mind. Offer to do a consistent, routine errand to help on a regular basis. This will help the family manage tasks in a simplified, effective way.

### Where to start:

Ask someone close to the family what the family's immediate needs are. Once they give you an idea, let the family know you're willing to help them and be specific about what you plan to do for them.

## 3. Help with childcare.

Offer to drive siblings to school, sports or other activities, babysit siblings on days when there may be frequent appointments or hospital stays or, if the kids are older, offer to take them somewhere fun like the mall or to a movie. Creating a routine for siblings helps them cope with the new family dynamic.

### Where to start:

Think about your daily routine and schedule cross-over with the family. If possible, decide to do something consistent like drive a child to and from school. Otherwise, ask the family if there's a day you can take to help with childcare.



*Mariah, osteosarcoma survivor*



Griffin, Ewing sarcoma survivor, with parents

#### 4. Send mail.

Mail is a great way to let families know you're thinking of them, and it helps break up the long days and nights when the family is either inpatient or when they're stuck at home.

##### Where to start:

See page 13 for phrases to put in a card to get started. Consider sending mail to the sibling or family member who isn't getting medical care. Humor is welcome, so go ahead and send that funny card. Here are some ideas: Decorate the envelope, put together a care package, include something unique to you like your favorite joke, a photo of your pet or family, your child's drawing, your favorite prayer card or enlist your friends and family to send cards as well.

“I loved getting mail! It was always exciting, especially during weeks when I hadn't left home or the hospital for days and was bored out of my mind...it was always so much fun to open.”

– Sarah, childhood cancer survivor



*Harrison, leukemia survivor, with parents*

## 5. Offer to visit and bring a treat.

At the hospital, a family can only watch movies, TV shows or sit on Facebook for so long before they start to long for personal interaction. Visiting, especially when the family has a long road ahead of them, helps eliminate monotony and allows them to check out of the cancer world, at least for a little bit. Bringing them a treat, like food from a favorite restaurant, coffee or a snack, gives the family something to look forward to in addition to your visit.

### Where to start:

Keep tabs on social media to see when a family is in the hospital. Send a message asking if they're up for a visit. Don't be afraid of rejection. Remember, the family is basing their answer off of how their child is feeling, what the treatment schedule looks like and whether or not they feel ready to interact. If they are up for a visit, ask if they'd like a treat and ask what sounds good. Oftentimes, treatment can change taste or cause nausea. Some other ideas: Bring a new magazine, news and stories. Sometimes families feel left out of everyday life.

## 6. Help with yardwork.

When a family doesn't have to worry about yardwork, they can spend more time together and there's the added bonus of giving the family a sense of peace. Less to do at home leaves more time to rest. Mowing the lawn, raking the leaves, weeding the flower bed, shoveling snow; all of these help clear a family's mind and alleviate stress.

### Where to start:

If you notice something, go for it. Is the lawn getting long? Cut it. Is there a foot of snow in the driveway? Start up the snow blower. Depending on your relationship to the family and the chore you're doing, you don't necessarily need to ask the family's permission. Typically, it takes a lot of extra energy and time for a family to hand out tasks and a helpful surprise can make all the difference in their day.

*“I appreciated when people surprised with unexpected help. Then, I didn't have to feel guilty...Instead, I woke up to the surprise of a clear driveway and overwhelming gratitude for having such a thoughtful friend.”*

*– Laura, mother of a cancer patient*

## 7. Donate in their honor.

Chances are, there's a charity for whatever illness or health crisis a family is facing. A donation lets the family know you're willing to fight this disease along with them.

### Where to start:

Check to see if there's a charity or fund set up in their honor. If there isn't, ask the family if they have a favorite charity they'd like you to send your donation. Children's Cancer Research Fund can also help families set up [fundraisers](#).

## 8. Send a simple text message.

It's nice to know someone is thinking of you, so do the same for a family. A simple text or Facebook message can make a big difference in a family's day, especially if they're going through a holiday or anniversary (like a diagnosis date or a death). The message could be as simple as "I'm thinking of you today." You can also refer to the list of phrases to write in a card for other ideas on page 13.

### Where to start:

Either send the text on a random day, or set a reminder on your phone for a day that you know is important to the family.

*"Almost three years later, I still get text messages from friends on the anniversary of my brother's death. Knowing others are still thinking about him makes my day easier."*

*– Alli, sister of a childhood cancer patient*



*Jack (left), brain tumor patient, with family*

## 9. Donate your vacation days.

Some companies allow coworkers to donate their vacation or sick days to family members in need. This is an especially generous, vital way to support someone facing a health crisis- especially if you may not know him or her very well. Donating vacation days takes off an immense amount of pressure.

### Where to start:

Ask your boss or HR representative if this is an option in your company.

## 10. Give a gift card.

Giving a gift card is a great way to let someone know you're thinking of them and want to make their situation better in any way you can. With a gift card, you don't have the pressure of buying the perfect gift and you don't have to worry about them already having the same thing. Plus, online shopping provides an activity during long days at home or in the hospital, so consider giving a certificate or card that can be used on the web. If the family has multiple children, consider giving a gift card to a sibling. Oftentimes, siblings feel left out if their brother or sister is the only one receiving gifts.

### Where to start:

Think about the type of gift card you want to give. Massage gift certificates are great for older children and caregivers. As one cancer survivor says, "After I had been in the hospital for a month, [a massage] was amazing after being so achy from lying in bed for so long." Grocery and gas gift certificates are great money-savers for families. Gift cards to places like Target or Amazon provide a fun online shopping distraction for children or teenagers.

### Bonus:

Give a gift card to a cleaning service. Then, the family can arrange to have their house cleaned when they need an extra hand.

Be specific with your support. A specific, planned action, like an errand or visit, helps keep your support stress-free for the family.

Be honest. It's okay not to know what to say or do, especially if you're not in a family's inner-circle. You can tell the family that you'd like to help in any way you can, let them know you're not sure what would benefit them most and offer specific ideas to choose from. Otherwise, a card is always a great way to show support.

## WHAT TO AVOID

- Never decide on your own to sponsor a large project like a fundraiser or major house repair without talking to the family first. Any supportive undertaking needs to be done in a way that respects the family's wishes and honors their privacy.
- Avoid unannounced visits. Depending on how the family is feeling, it could add stress.
- Avoid comparing a situation in your life to the family's situation. Even if it's similar, it could leave them feeling misunderstood.
- Don't give unsolicited advice. Either the family has already thought about the advice you're about to give, or it'll make them feel like they aren't doing everything they could.



*Caiah (left), leukemia survivor, with family*

## NOW YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO. BUT, WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Two moms, Mindy Dykes and Laura Sobiech, both with sons affected by childhood cancer, offer up some words that lifted them up during their experiences and tell us which comments would have been better left unsaid.

Here are good options of what to say

- ✓ “I am so sorry for the struggle you face—I think of you often—and I wish every good thing for you and your family.”

**LS:** These are simple and acknowledge the hardship. They let me know you care.

**MD:** What I’m thinking when you say this: “Thank you, we love being remembered and we want to think of goodness in our futures, too.”

- ✓ “I pray for you every morning,” or “I pray for you whenever I’m at church.”

**LS:** It’s nice to hear specifics. It lets us know that you really are doing what you say. And, I liked knowing that people were praying for us because, quite frankly, there were days when I couldn’t do it.



### MINDY DYKES

Mother of 9-year-old Connor, a brain tumor survivor

My son was diagnosed at 6 weeks old with a brain tumor. It was massive and required emergency brain surgery and an aggressive plan to treat the remaining cancer cells. Connor made it through surgery, survived chemotherapy and a bone marrow transplant all before he was 7 months old. We, as well as friends and family, were in shock and disbelief. Our family could be lifted up or devastated by questions asked or comments made. We learned quickly why it is so important to consider every word uttered in a time of crisis.

## What to Say, Continued

- ✓ “I heard your son has cancer and that really, really sucks.”

**MD:** Thank you for being plain, simple and on point.

- ✓ “I don’t know what to say. I wish desperately that I could make this go away for you. Can I bring you a meal on an evening this week?”

**LS:** This is authentic and it gives a very specific action.

- ✓ “Your son’s (or your) strength is inspiring.”

**LS:** I’m proud of this kid of mine; the kid I have a front row seat to watch him suffer with such grace. His strength inspires me, too.

**MD:** I’m glad you’ve noticed because I am scared and this helps me gain the confidence to keep going.



### LAURA SOBIECH

Mother of Zach, who passed from osteosarcoma in 2013 at age 18

My son, Zach, was diagnosed with osteosarcoma when he was 14 years old. We spent the next three and a half years battling the disease, learning to let go and, eventually, saying goodbye. Before Zach died, he wrote several songs to say goodbye. His most well-known song is “Clouds.” Throughout Zach’s battle with cancer, we had countless people come together and help us through by offering us words of encouragement and practical help, both of which I will always be grateful. But, we also experienced words and actions that were less than desirable and sometimes burdensome.

## What Not to Say

### ✘ “What’s his prognosis?”

**LS:** I don’t want to think about my child dying. I want to focus on him living. If you don’t have an immediate family connection or extremely close relationship with the family, you’re better off just Googling the disease and prognosis.

### ✘ “How rare is this diagnosis?”

**MD:** My son’s disease is very rare, we are terrified and we only want to focus on how to save our child. It doesn’t matter common, uncommon, good or bad it seems. Cancer has invaded our child’s body and it sucks.

### ✘ “Seventy (or any other) percent chance of survival is pretty good.”

**LS:** I actually had someone say this to me. I felt like asking him how he would feel if someone knocked on his door and told him that his son had a thirty percent chance of being dead in five years. Anything other than one hundred percent is not “pretty good.”

### ✘ “Keep fighting!”

**LS:** I hated it when people said this. It sounded too much like a lecture. It implies that we were thinking of giving up and no one just gives up. But there are times when we have to decide how to do the cancer thing. What we decided as a family might look different than someone else’s decision. But, we would never give up.

## What Not to Say, Continued

### ✘ “I know exactly what you are going through because my (insert distant relative here) had cancer.”

**LS:** No. You don’t. You have no idea what it’s like unless you have watched your son die from a vicious disease. I get trying to show empathy by drawing from personal experience, but it’s best not to imply a parallel experience unless you really do have one.

### ✘ “I don’t know how you are handling this, you are so strong.”

**MD:** What I’m thinking when you say this: Nope, I’m not actually handling it at all. I’m numb and trying to keep going each day.

**LS:** I’m not a hero for taking care of my child. You would do it too. This just made me feel awkward and I was never sure how to respond. Maybe say something like, “I admire your strength” instead. Then, all I have to say is, “Thank you.”

### ✘ “What do you think caused it?”

**MD:** It’s best not to go here. It leaves open the thought that I may have done something to cause my child’s cancer or that I could have prevented it. The cancer started growing when he was in my womb, where he was supposed to be safe, and that’s a haunting thought.

## What Not to Say, Continued

- ✘ “Have you tried....cannabis oil, baking soda & maple syrup, taking him to a chiropractor in California...?”

**LS:** I probably have not tried those things because my countless hours of research turned up nothing to support it. I actually had a man come to my door just days before Zach died with this kind of question. Did he really think I hadn't checked into those kinds of treatments years ago?

Maybe you've said one of the “What Not to Says” and thought you were helping. And maybe the person you were saying it to smiled and nodded like they appreciated it. And, maybe, they actually did appreciate it. You may be scratching your head wondering what the formula is here.

### Here's what it boils down to:

Think about the response you are soliciting. Is the thing you are about to say going to be helpful to the person you are saying it to, or is it really just going to make you feel better?

## 5 THINGS TO WRITE IN A CARD

You've picked out a great card, and you have your pen in hand. But, what to write? You don't want to write the wrong thing, but you want them to know you care.

Here are some phrases to help you start:

### PHRASES FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES FACING CANCER

Dear [name],

1. “I am so sorry for the struggle you are going through, and I think of you often.”
2. “I wish I could take this pain away for you.”
3. “I truly admire your strength and resilience.”
4. “I wish every good thing for you and your family, and I will be thinking (or praying for) of you as you go through this.”
5. “I am sorry you are going through this— this sucks.”

You can help by following us and sharing these tips on social media!



## OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES

*Emily McDowell Studio - Empathy Cards*

<http://emilymcdowell.com/collections/cards/products/232-c-no-good-card-for-this-sympathy-card>

*Los Angeles Times - How not to say the wrong thing*

<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/apr/07/opinion/la-oe-0407-silk-ring-theory-20130407>

*Simple Bites - Cooking for Others: A Guide to Giving Sympathy Meals*

<http://www.simplebites.net/cooking-for-others-a-guide-to-giving-sympathy-meals/>

*American Cancer Society - How to Be a Friend to Someone With Cancer*

<http://www.cancer.org/treatment/understandingyourdiagnosis/talking-aboutcancer/how-to-be-a-friend-to-someone-with-cancer>

## ABOUT US

Children's Cancer Research Fund is a national organization dedicated to eradicating childhood cancer by funding pioneering efforts in the prevention, diagnosis, treatment and cure of childhood cancers. Many discoveries funded by Children's Cancer Research Fund have revolutionized the way childhood cancer is treated worldwide. We also provide education and support quality-of-life programs for patients and families.

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