



HELPFUL HINTS FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

Every day Sharsheret fields questions from family members and friends about how to best support the woman they love while she is facing breast cancer or ovarian cancer. Here are some helpful tips based on the wisdom from the women of Sharsheret.

At Diagnosis

Follow her lead. Let your loved one share the information she chooses to share in the way that is most comfortable for her. It is not necessary to ask her a lot of medical questions. What is important is being a good listener. Listening is a caring gesture that shows you support her.

Validate her feelings. The woman you love may be experiencing a range of emotions. Whether she is scared, sad, empowered, or grateful, it's important to validate her feelings. While it's tempting to share stories about other people with cancer or offer "pep talks", remember that this is *her* experience and she will set the emotional tone at any given time.

Let her make the decisions. When your family member or friend is diagnosed with cancer, she may feel like circumstances are out of her control. In the areas where she can maintain control, let her do so. Remember that each of us handles challenging situations differently. Some people want to learn as much information as they can about their illness, while others would rather just be told the minimum of what they need to know to get through the experience. Whichever approach your loved one takes, it is the right one for her. You may not agree with her surgical or treatment decisions, but they are hers to make. Let her decide which household or family responsibilities she is willing to delegate. You can gently offer suggestions or help her think things through out loud, but in the end, support the decisions she makes.

Create your own support system. Although the woman you love is the one diagnosed with cancer, her journey will have a tremendous impact on you. It's important to develop your own support system, whether it is a friend, colleague, Rabbi, or mental health professional. As a caregiver, friend, or family member, you can also contact Sharsheret at 866.474.2774 to speak with a staff member about receiving support and resources. Remember, by taking good care of yourself, you will be better able to support the woman you love.

During Surgery or Treatment

Be clear about what you can offer. It's tempting to ask the woman you love what you can do to be helpful. Recognize that she may not know what she needs, or she may ask for assistance you are unable to provide. It may be more helpful to offer her a list of ways that you can help. Here are some suggestions:

- keep her company at home, at the hospital, or during treatment
- drive her to treatment
- accompany her and take notes at doctor appointments
- organize her medical and/or insurance information
- encourage her to reach out to Sharsheret for support
- offer to research additional support options
- organize or participate in a prayer group
- purchase clothing that may help her feel more comfortable
- provide her with magazines, DVDs, or other fun distractions
- arrange a break for her husband, partner, or caregiver

- arrange a cleaning service for her home
- arrange for or provide meals
- shop for groceries
- help with laundry
- carpool her children
- help her children with homework
- take her children to an activity

Keep in touch. Treatment or recovery from treatment can continue for a length of time. Remember to reach out and stay in touch with the woman you love. Check in with her to tell her you care and that you are still thinking of her. A quick note, e-mail, or phone message saying “I’m thinking of you” will lift her spirits and help her continue to feel supported. Let her know that it’s okay if she does not return your e-mails or phone calls.

Life beyond cancer. The woman you love may not want to feel like a cancer patient 24/7. It’s okay to share the happenings in your life, updates about your family, what’s happening in the community, the plot of a favorite book or television show. She may be seeking to experience life beyond cancer when engaged in her daily activities and routines. Allow her to take the lead and avoid overwhelming her with questions about her illness or treatment. Remember, too, that her family **members** may also want to experience life beyond cancer and are not a conduit for information about how their loved one is coping.

After Treatment

Remember that healing is a long term process. On the outside, the woman you love may look the same as she did before her diagnosis, but she has been changed by this experience. She has survived and managed the medical, physical, and logistical aspects of cancer. She may now be ready to look back and emotionally process what has happened. She may also worry about her future risk of recurrence. Embrace who she has become during this journey; continue to follow her lead and be a good listener. Let her know you are still there for her.

For some women, the journey continues. The woman you love may be living with advanced breast cancer or recurrent ovarian cancer as a chronic illness. Her feelings and experiences may fluctuate, so it’s important to follow her lead and, as always, be a good and compassionate listener. Regularly review these helpful hints and continue the meaningful and caring support that you have been offering throughout her experience. Remember to pace yourself, use your own support system, and delegate responsibilities when necessary.



Sharsheret is a national not-for-profit organization supporting young Jewish women and families facing breast cancer at every stage - before, during, and after diagnosis. We help women and families connect to our community in the way that feels most comfortable for them, taking into consideration their stage of life, diagnosis or treatment, as well as their connection to Judaism. We also have specialized programs for women facing ovarian cancer. To learn more about our national programs and services, visit www.sharsheret.org.

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