

In a Holiday Conversation About Cancer, What You Don't Say Matters

CU Cancer Center oncologist Kyle Concannon, MD, offers advice on how to talk about cancer with someone newly diagnosed – and what to avoid.

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You just found out that someone you care about – a relative or friend – has been diagnosed with cancer. You're going to see them at a holiday gathering. You want to say something supportive.

So what do you say? And, maybe even more importantly, what do you not say?

Those are questions that [University of Colorado Cancer Center](#) member [Kyle Concannon](#), MD, thinks about a lot, both as a thoracic medical oncologist treating patients, and as co-host of [Cracking Cancer](#), a podcast that seeks to break down barriers between cancer-care providers and patients.

Concannon – who in August [became an assistant professor](#) in the [CU Anschutz Department of Medicine's Division of Medical Oncology](#) – shares the podcast microphone with people living with cancer, including Samantha Murrell, who was [diagnosed in 2024](#) with stage 4 [lung cancer](#).

"Samantha has educated me on a lot of things," including how to have conversations about cancer, Concannon says.

Unintentionally hurtful

Concannon says he has learned from Murrell and others that the desire to reassure someone with cancer might lead us to say things that might be unintentionally hurtful.

"A lot of times, when we're interacting with someone who's newly diagnosed, the things we try to do relate to our own anxieties and discomforts around their diagnosis," he says. "Sometimes, in order to relieve that discomfort, we express sentiments of reassurance – like 'everything's going to be OK' – that can come off as negative, even though the intention is positive. Everything may not be OK."

Likewise, saying things like "everything happens for a reason" or "the universe doesn't give you anything you can't handle" can be "triggering for someone newly diagnosed with cancer,"

Concannon says. “It can create the sentiment that there’s some intentionality behind a metastatic cancer diagnosis, which can be really hard for people.”

He also cautions against using phrases like “you’re a fighter” or “you’re going to win this battle.” As he puts it: “Framing this as a fight to win can make people feel guilty when they make a choice not to pursue more treatment, and that decision does not make them a loser. There may be a point for people who have metastatic cancers when they have to stop doing treatments.”

And avoid saying a person with cancer looks like they’re doing well, Concannon suggests. “Don’t assume, because the surface looks good, that under the surface is also good. There’s a lot of symptoms that cancer patients have that you can’t see, emotional as well as physical.”

‘I’m here for you’

So what do you say? It’s best to keep it simple and give your friend or loved one some space, Concannon advises.

“There’s an impulse that we feel that we need to have an answer – what they should do, how they should feel, how things are going to go. But Samantha has told me that some of the most helpful interactions she’s had are with people who say, ‘Look, I don’t know what to say, I don’t know what to do, but I’m here for you. I care about you, and please, just know that.’ Having someone who is emotionally present, acknowledges the discomfort, and doesn’t try to fix it can actually be more therapeutic than the person coming with well-intended solutions that might not be helpful.”

In offering to help, we should “let the person who is diagnosed steer what help looks like,” Concannon suggests. “They have a better sense of what they need. A good approach would be to say, ‘I’m not sure how I can best help you, but I’m here with whatever you need. I’m thinking about you and I care about you.’ If you know the person well, you might have a good sense of what practical things they need to make their life easier, so it would be OK to say, ‘Would it be OK if I brought you over XYZ meal on this day?’”

Once you’ve expressed your support, pay attention to whether your friend or loved one wants to talk further about their cancer, he says. “Be clear that you’re a safe person to talk to, and then let them come to you. If someone is clearly opening up and they start talking about their experience, they may be giving you the signal to go deeper. But if they simply say, ‘Thank you, I appreciate that,’ maybe they’re not ready to go into all that. They’ll remember that you’re there for them when they’re ready to talk.”

If you have experience with cancer yourself, avoid doing a deep dive into comparing your own symptoms and treatment with those of your friend. “Every cancer diagnosis, every treatment plan, how you experience your treatment plan, is so unique,” Concannon says. “An alternative might be to say, ‘I was diagnosed with XYZ, I underwent this treatment, and if you ever want to talk about that, let me know.’”

Strengthening relationships

Concannon recommends that we respect the fact that when someone with cancer is at a holiday event, “they want to enjoy it like they did before. That can be hard when you’re diagnosed with cancer. So show support, but let them steer the conversation.”

In short: “The best thing you can do is to be there for them, however they might need it.”

Asked what advice he would have for a person newly diagnosed with cancer who’ll be attending a holiday gathering, Concannon says that is a subject one of his podcast guests brought up.

“He talks about how he felt uncomfortable bringing up his diagnosis because it made other people uncomfortable. He wanted to be positive and not bring down the mood. But my advice would be to give other people the opportunity to show support for you, because people enjoy that. If someone shows kindness to you, you might feel vulnerable, but it also shows that you trust them and care about them. It strengthens relationships.”

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