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[Home](#) > [Friend's mother has cancer — What should I say or do?](#)

Friend's mother has cancer — What should I say or do? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

The mother of one of my best friends from high school was diagnosed with liver cancer a few months ago. She is quite ill and in a lot of pain. She's been in and out of the hospital lately and things don't look so good. My own father was diagnosed with prostate cancer a year and a half ago, but he is really doing quite well (with medication, treatment, etc.). My friend's mother will probably be dead within six months to a year, so I'm not going through an immediate crisis.

My question is: What things should (and shouldn't) I be saying to, and doing for, my friend? I try so hard to be there for her but I really don't know what she's going through. She is very matter-of-fact about the fact that her mom is going to die. But I'm sure there's something I could be doing, isn't there? I hate feeling like I'm actually making her feel worse! Could you give me some idea of what she might be going through right now and how I could help? Even if it's a method for taking her mind off it occasionally (if that's a good idea).

Thanks,
Just Trying to Help

Answer

Dear Just Trying to Help,

It sounds as though your friend is lucky to have you in her life, and that you are already playing a supportive role by being there when she needs you. It's hard to know exactly what your friend is going through — everyone deals with illness and loss in different ways. The best (and maybe only) way to know is to ask her. She may or may not want or be able to share her experience with you, but to ask is one way to show you care. In terms of what she needs, again, it's hard to know unless you ask; however, there are many ways you can show and offer support (more on that below). Different people crave and require different types of support. Similarly, you may be better or more comfortable providing certain types of support over others.

One thing you can do is let her know that you're willing to talk with her about anything, at any time, so that when she's ready, she knows she can rely on you. You can also let her know that you will sit with her and neither one of you needs to talk. Sometimes just *being* with someone can

be incredibly supportive, even if no words are exchanged. In terms of taking her mind off her mother's illness — ask her. Would she like to go to the movies one night? Or, visit a museum? Maybe go shopping? Or, meet for coffee, etc.? It will all depend on how she's feeling at that moment, whether or not today was a particularly difficult or good day, whether she'd rather not take her mind off her mother's illness, or whether she's at the point where she really would appreciate a break.

You can also offer her tangible support — offer to take on some of her responsibilities such as cooking meals, running errands, or doing housework. Depending on your friend, relieving her of these day-to-day activities may help to ease her burden. Ask her if you can help out in this way.

The other thing to think about is expressing your own feelings with your friend — telling her how you feel, with respect to your father's illness, her mother's illness, and your day-to-day life. Being real with your feelings will help nurture your friendship and help you each deal with the ups and downs of life. If you feel overwhelmed, it may be useful to talk to a mental health provider. You could even encourage your friend to do so if and when she's ready.

The best thing you can do is to continue being her friend. Don't pull away or avoid her. It's good to acknowledge the situation rather than avoid it. If she seems distant at times, it's to be expected. Keep providing your friendship. You don't have to force your companionship; just let her know you're around for whatever she needs — for talking, listening, or laughing; or, for a good night out to forget. Knowing that she has a good friend may make all the difference.

To friendship, through the best and worst of times.

Alice!

Category:

[Emotional Health](#) [2]

[Grief & Loss](#) [3]

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[Relationship Stuff](#) [5]

[Relating & Communicating](#) [6]

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[Counseling and Psychological Services \(CPS\) \(Morningside\)](#) [10]

[Mental Health Services \(CUIMC\)](#) [11]

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Footer menu

- ▼ Contact Alice!
 - Content Use
 - Media Inquiries
 - Comments & Corrections
- ▼ Syndication & Licensing
 - Licensing Q&As
 - Get Alice! on Your Website
 - Full Site Syndication
 - Link to Go Ask Alice!

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Links

- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/friends-mother-has-cancer-%E2%80%94-what-should-i-say-or-do>
- [2] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/emotional-health>
- [3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/grief-loss>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationships>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relationship-stuff>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/relating-communicating>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/how-long-does-mourning-last-1>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/how-do-you-prepare-your-body-chemotherapy>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/relationship-dying-person>
- [10] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/counseling-and-psychological-services-cps-morningside>
- [11] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/resource/mental-health-services-cuimc>