

WONDERS & WORRIES

# Supporting A Friend Through Illness



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Professional support for children through a parent's illness or injury.

We will, together.



*True friendship comes when the silence between two people is comfortable.*

– David Tyson Gentry

It can be hard to know how to support someone navigating an illness, especially if this is a new illness or the illness direction has changed for the worse. As your friend is navigating this new territory, they are likely digesting information about the illness and learning about how it may impact their life in the short term, and potentially long term as well. You may have a friend who is able to readily articulate their needs, and for others, it will be hard for them to ask for help. In either case, what's important is that they know you are there for them during this time. Below are some considerations to keep in mind and ideas for support that may be appreciated.

## Know Your Relationship

What type of relationship do you have with the friend who is ill? Are they a coworker, acquaintance, or a close friend? Depending on the type of relationship you have with your friend, you may want to find a point-person who you can lean on for ideas on how best to support your friend. Of course, you do not need to have a close relationship with your friend to open the door for support. Here are a few ways to acknowledge the hardship and extend an offer for support (helpful for this first offer to be more concrete):

*“I’m sorry you are having to go through this. I can’t imagine how hard some days must be. I just want you to know that if you have appointments after school at any point, Johnny can come to our house after school.”*

*“I know we’ve just connected a few times, but I wanted to let you know that I’m thinking about you and your family. I can’t imagine how hard it must be to get dinner on the table some days and I’d love to bring by a few meals. Would that be okay with you?”*

## OFFER TANGIBLE THINGS

*What do you need? What can I do to help?*

Although these statements have wonderful intentions, for someone newly navigating this hardship, they most likely are not in the habit of accepting help. By starting small with concrete ideas, this can eliminate the need for your friend to come up with a list of ideas and also helps your friend warm up to the idea of receiving help. Below is a sample message that offers some tangible support:

*Jamie: Good running into you the other day. I am sorry to hear about your husband’s illness and I would love to help. Some things I can think of that may work well:*

- *Take Benjamin to/from school on routine days that work for your schedule*
- *Bring meals on Mondays (I am off work/meal prep that day, so I can simply make extra if I know what you like)*
- *Lawn care—my lawn helper is looking for more work, and I am happy to have him do your yard when he does mine (2x monthly). This would be my treat.*

*I am happy to do more or if you have other tangible needs you can think of, please don’t hesitate to ask. These are just a few that came to mind.*

## ASK ROUTINELY

Care is often most robust immediately following a new diagnosis or a recent death. The 4 weeks that follow that are usually when everyone shows up. It is month 2 or 3, or 6 months into a treatment that care can become less consistent and sometimes more needed depending on the treatment or how the family is coping.

It may be helpful to show up immediately, put a calendar reminder on your phone to check in monthly, or to identify yourself as the 2-months-in-friend who may lay low when lots of help is available but check in when support has lessened.

## Other Tips

### I'M NOT SURE WHAT TO SAY...

- It's okay to acknowledge the initial discomfort in knowing just what to say.
- Talk about normal things. Your friendship was about many other things before the diagnosis, so honor your friend as the whole person they are. Ask and share about normal things.
- If you feel like what you are saying is silly in comparison to what they are walking through, say that. They will tell you if they are too wiped to talk further—and they will tell you if they are enjoying talking about things other than their treatment.
- Example: *Just so you know, I'm always ready to listen if you want to talk about how \_\_\_\_\_ is affecting you. Also know that I'm going to treat you like my same old best friend. So, is it okay to talk about everyday things? If you don't have the capacity, will you tell me?*

### I'M NOT SURE WHAT TO DO...

- You can care in very tangible ways, but one of the most needed, especially for close friends, is to show up and sit. To simply watch a show or do laundry while you sit together is company your friend may crave. Offer that too.
- *May I come over on Tuesday? I can bring food and help fold clothes. If you have energy to watch a show together, I would enjoy time with you. If you would rather take a nap and I can help kids with homework, that is an option too. Sound, okay?*

### WHEN BRINGING FOOD...

- Consider a meal train to avoid a surplus of food at the same time or every person bringing the same thing.
- Ask about favorite foods, foods that the family does not like, any allergies or food sensitivities.
- Not everything has to be home-made—gift cards, uber-eats are all welcome and can give families the sense of choice and control that can be very helpful.

- Think of snacks and beverages too (fruit, goldfish for littles, Lacroix, juice pouches)
- Be willing to drop and go—families may be inundated with guests and simply need some down time. They want/need the food but may not have time for a 20-minute chat at the door. Honor that and do the quick text: In route! Will text when dropping on your patio!

### WHEN INTERACTING WITH KIDS...

- Treat them as per typical – kids don't want to be the spokesperson for their parent, and they often feel put on the spot a lot. Aim to not pepper with questions, just follow their lead – they may feel like talking or not.
- They may not be excited to see you—while you are helping their family out, they may really miss their dad picking them up from school – try not to take that personally.

### CHECK YOUR OWN EXPECTATIONS...

- Your care and support are so valuable—but your friend will not have energy to write thank you notes or reciprocate care. Be sure your generosity is without need for reciprocity during this season.
- Honor privacy
- This is their illness journey and theirs to share when, how and with whom they choose.
- If you are observing trends in their children that are concerning, be brave enough to voice it and be willing to help where you are comfortable doing so—but offer help as a choice. And honor the choice they make—even if you disagree.

Although we've summarized some concrete supportive strategies, the intangible supports will go the distance – being available, present, and staying attuned throughout your friend's illness.

### Of note, potentially applicable websites:

- [Meal Train](#)
- [Caring Bridge](#)



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