

TOOL: Tips for supportive conversations about cancer

These tips may be useful for both volunteer managers supporting a volunteer with a cancer diagnosis and can also be adapted and shared with volunteers for conversations with the people they support.

Cancer can bring a wide range of emotions, and someone may be feeling fear, anger or frustration among many others. Talking to a good listener can help.

You're probably already skilled at this, but here are some tips to facilitate a good conversation:

- Let people talk when they're ready, you don't have to talk about cancer.
- You don't need the answers. Listening is enough, and it's okay to let silences sit.
- It's fine to set a limit on how long you talk, these conversations can be tiring.
- Listen, rather than planning what to say next.
- Respect the person's feelings, even if what they say is hard to hear.
- Try not to say everything will be fine, or to push positivity, let people be honest about how they feel.
- Reflect back what you've heard ("So you mean that...?") to check you've understood.
- Avoid comparing to other people's stories, every cancer experience is different.
- Use humour with cautiously, and resist the urge to simply 'cheer them up'
- Let empathy lead. If someone becomes upset, something simple like "I can see how upsetting this is" can help. If you are close to them, you could simply sit with them and hold their hand or find a quiet space for them to have some privacy.

Listening deeply

Listening is just as important as talking. Active listening means giving your full attention and avoiding the urge to plan your response, rush the conversation, or steer it to a conclusion.

We all want to feel heard, especially when talking about something serious. You may feel unsure how best to support someone but simply listening can make a real difference. You don't need to have all the answers.

It's also okay to talk about everyday things. You don't need to focus on cancer all the time. Take your cue from the person: ask if they'd like to talk and let them decide how much to share.

Your body language can also show care. Maintain eye contact where appropriate, avoid distractions, and give the person your full attention. One important part of support is being comfortable with silence, rather than filling it with conversation.

Choose your words carefully and acknowledge how difficult things may be. Saying "I don't know what to say" can be honest and supportive without avoiding the topic.

Things you might say:

- I'm sorry this has happened to you
- If you ever feel like talking, I'm here to listen
- What are you thinking of doing?
- How can I help?
- I'm thinking of you

Things that may be less helpful:

- I know just how you feel

- I know just what you should do
- I know someone who had the same diagnosis
- I'm sure you'll be fine
- Don't worry