

WEB EXCLUSIVES

What Really Helps

BY LORI HOPE

Dani West had recently completed chemotherapy and felt terrific for the first time in months. Her hair had grown in lush and curly, unlike her previously thin, straight locks.

“I wish my hair could be like that,” said her friend, Marcia, seeing Dani’s new ‘do for the first time. “It’s almost worth...uh...” Marcia stopped, catching herself before delivering the blow. But Dani still felt it.

“She’s lucky that I’m a compassionate person,” said Dani, “or she may have gotten decked!”

Most of us who have had cancer have at least one such "oops" story to share. And although we usually laugh after the fact, in the moment these remarks can cut deep, intensifying feelings of fear, anxiety or loneliness. Though no one can avoid making a faux pas every now and then—most of us speak without thinking as a part of normal conversation—we can keep blurts to a minimum by following a few simple guidelines.

To make the following guidelines more memorable, I came up with an acronym. Based on interviews and surveys of cancer survivors, caregivers and health and communications professionals I conducted for my book, *Help Me Live: 20 Things People with Cancer Want You to Know*, these guidelines will enable you to be fully present and do what you want most: to provide comfort, care and support.

Listen without judging, interrupting, or feeling like you have to provide an answer or solution. More than anything, people who are suffering need to feel heard and understood. And when you listen well, you tend to think before speaking, which helps you avoid gaffes.

Ask permission before you give advice. Cancer patients often feel overwhelmed with information, and if they've already made their treatment decisions, they don't want them undermined.

Understand that your friend is especially sensitive. People who are traumatized often regress emotionally and need extra care, so if they snap at you, forgive them.

Give it time if the patient doesn't feel like talking or visiting now. Mood swings are normal, so don't take it personally if your friend is less than friendly.

Humor helps almost everyone cope. Give us a funny movie or book.

Let go of the myth that everyone dies of cancer. No one likes to feel pitied.

Empathize by trying to remember a time when you were terrified. That will help you understand your friend's fear and anxiety.

Analyze your audience. Think about whom you're dealing with. Does the person like shopping? Golf? Bring the appropriate magazines.

Reach out by picking up groceries, running errands or helping in the garden. General offers of help can feel overwhelming; most people prefer specific offers.

No horror stories—ever—about others who died of cancer. People want to hear hopeful tales, particularly about people with the same kind of cancer who recovered.

Love! Consider the patient's needs rather than your own. Put yourself in the other person's shoes and focus on their feelings and concerns.

Own your fears. Say that you're afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. That will defuse tension and show you care.

Validate your friend by acknowledging that negative feelings, such as anger or despair, are normal. No one likes to hear they have to think positively all the time.

Exercise caution by letting your friend bring up the subject of health. Sometimes people with cancer just don't want to talk about it, especially after they've completed treatment.

I encourage you to review these guidelines before talking with someone with cancer. Even if you don't remember everything—even if you put your foot in your mouth, as we all do—you will feel more confident, capable and comfortable.

Lori Hope is a public speaker, Emmy-winning documentary producer and author of *Help Me Live: 20 Things People with Cancer Want You to Know*. A former medical reporter and editor of a San Francisco Bay Area monthly, her work has appeared in Newsweek and other publications, and her commentaries have been broadcast on radio stations nationwide. For more information, see www.LoriHope.com.