



How to Help a Sick Friend

An Interview With Letty Cottin Pogrebin

*A novelist and longtime journalist, Pogrebin is a cancer survivor and the author of *How to Be a Friend to a Friend Who's Sick* (PublicAffairs).*

When a friend is dealing with a health problem, it can be tempting to think, I wouldn't want to intrude, or to trip yourself up worrying you'll say the wrong thing. But the worst thing you can do is nothing at all.

Stop by. If a friend just broke her leg, send her a plant, a movie, or a stack of magazines. (Generally, I avoid sending food because people have a lot of dietary restrictions.) But if your dear friend has just been diagnosed with cancer, you need to get in touch and say something like, "I am free this afternoon and I'd love to see you."

Listen carefully. Most people I interviewed for my book really wanted

to talk about what was happening to them. Make sure your friend knows she can be completely honest with you about everything: her pain, your visits, what she wants and doesn't want. By the same token, patients, especially those in the hospital, often feel obligated to welcome visitors, even when they're miserable or exhausted. Reassure her that it's OK if she needs you to back off.

Know what not to say. Your friend will be asked "How are you?" over and over. The patients I interviewed all said it gets incredibly annoying. Instead ask, "What are you feeling?" And don't say "You look

great," because it suggests that you expected her to look awful. In general, avoid platitudes like "Chin up," "Everything happens for a reason," and "You're so brave." And definitely don't go with "Any of us could be hit by a bus tomorrow."

Tune in. A patient can't feel normal when everyone is reminding her that she's sick. Give your friend the gift of the ordinary. Ask her, "Do you feel like talking, or would you rather just watch TV together?"

Make yourself useful. The best things you can do for your friend are the mundane household tasks that pile up. When you get to her house, see what needs to be done, then do it—walk the dog, load the dishwasher, water the plants, take her kids for the day. Keep your eyes open, and don't wait to be asked.

—INTERVIEW BY DANIELLE PERGAMENT