



body

support systems

Five survivors tell exactly how you can
help someone with breast cancer.

IF IT SEEMS THAT everyone you know has breast cancer or is close to someone who does, it's not your imagination: One out of eight women will be affected by the disease. So even if you're not the one being diagnosed, it's very likely that someone close to you—a friend, a family member, or even the woman who serves up your morning latte—could use your support. But in the face of such a serious disease, it's hard to know what to say or how to be helpful without being intrusive. That's why Real Simple talked to five women who have lived with breast cancer to learn how the people around them lightened their loads, both practically and emotionally. Of course, every patient has different needs, which can change daily, but these 11 pieces of advice, born of hard-won experience, will help you lend a hand.

WRITTEN BY LIZ WELCH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN DOLAN

“ ‘Tis not
enough to help
the feeble up,
But to support
him after.”

William Shakespeare,
Timon of Athens



Laura Livingston Rubin was diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer three years ago, despite no family history of the disease, after her gynecologist found a lump during a routine exam. Laura underwent a lumpectomy, chemotherapy, and radiation and has been cancer-free for three years.

give a gift to the person, not the "cancer victim"

From the moment a woman is diagnosed, cancer takes over her life, so a gift that addresses who she was before the diagnosis as well as what she's going through is always appreciated. Laura Livingston Rubin, 34, a New York City-based publicist, invited her friends to a party right before she began her chemotherapy and was bowled over when a friend presented her with six American Express gift cards, totaling \$3,500. "All my friends chipped in," says Laura. "Each had a message, like 'Keep kicking ass!' or 'You're still hot!' When I was feeling blue, I could treat myself to something frivolous—a pedicure, a new dress, organic tomatoes. It lifted my spirits."

A self-help book on beating cancer may seem like a thoughtful gift, but it's better left on the shelf. "Those are things you need to choose yourself," says breast cancer survivor Cathy Scheibe, 67, a magazine publisher in LaMoure, North Dakota.

let her have dark days

While breast cancer is no longer an automatic death sentence—in fact, about 85 percent of those who receive an early diagnosis survive—many patients

still wonder, *Why me?* and have periods of self-pity. "I went through many 'This just sucks!' moments," says Beth Weinblatt, 35, a legal assistant in Bedminster, New Jersey, whose mother, grandmother, and aunt all had breast cancer. (Her mother, diagnosed when Beth was four years old, is a 31-year survivor.) When Beth was feeling low, friends who cheerfully insisted that she was going to "beat the disease" actually made her feel worse. "I really appreciated those friends who let me sulk," she says.

Sometimes having down days means a need for some privacy, says Lizanne Kelley, 49, a marketing director and a single mother in Fort Lauderdale. Although friends rallied around her during her treatment, they also gave her the space to process things at her own speed. "They'd call and check up on me," says Lizanne, "but no one pushed me for details, and I appreciated that enormously."

Lizanne Kelley's first mammogram, in 2000, revealed a nut-shaped mass in her right breast. After a lumpectomy, chemotherapy, and radiation, she was cancer-free for five years. But the disease came back in 2006, in her spine. Today Lizanne says she's simply "living with cancer."



what not to do

The right words can soothe; the wrong ones can sting. These survivors reveal what they found more hurtful than helpful.

DON'T say, "But you don't look sick!" Each woman interviewed for this story said that this well-meaning "compliment" irked because it showed a lack of understanding of what she was going through. "I didn't feel sick until I started doing chemo," says Beth Weinblatt. "The cure makes you feel sick, not the disease itself."

DON'T avoid her. For Angela Agbasi, the worst thing anyone could do was ignore her: "Some people disappeared from my life when they heard I had cancer. I think it scared them and they didn't know what to say. That hurt." It's better to pick up the phone and admit you're flummoxed. A simple "I don't know what to say, but I'm thinking about you" is all that is necessary.

*(continued on
following page)*



Beth Weinblatt was just 29 years old when she felt a lump the size of a peach pit near her breastbone. She was told she had a fast-growing form of stage 2 breast cancer and underwent a double mastectomy and chemotherapy. Five years later, there is no sign of the disease.

play chauffeur

Whether they're going in for a needle-biopsy appointment or chemotherapy, many patients say that having someone to sort out transportation is a godsend. Chemotherapy can be exhausting; sometimes it's all a patient can do to get out of bed, much less get behind the wheel. Even though Laura's best friend was living abroad, she arranged for a car service to take Laura to and from each chemo session. "The driver picked me up and waited until I was done," she says. "The thought of trying to hail a cab, let alone take the subway, was beyond me. Between the chemo and the antianxiety and anti-nausea drugs, you're slightly out of your gourd."

The arrangement resulted in an unexpected bond. Throughout the four months Laura was being shuttled back and forth, she became close with Kazi, her driver, who is Muslim. "He told me he prayed for me at his mosque, which I found tremendously comforting," says Laura.

look after her family

Angela Agbasi, 42, a mother of four in Los Angeles, began chemotherapy when her youngest son was just a month old. "The best way to take care of me

was to help me take care of my children," says Angela. "Everyone rallied and divvied things up." Her sister took her kids on the weekends, her mother-in-law helped with the newborn, and her mother and aunt pitched in with the cooking and cleaning. An old friend dropped by almost daily to see if she needed anything—groceries, child care, or a joke to lift her spirits—and also helped carpool Angela's older kids to and from school. Angela was especially touched when her friend Diane showed up in mid-December with a tree in tow. "I was so exhausted from the chemotherapy," says Angela. "I hadn't even thought about Christmas."

While Angela's friends helped with day-to-day chores, Lizanne's friends looked even farther down the road, subtly letting her know they would be there for Georgia, her teenage daughter, if the worst were to happen. When Lizanne's cancer came back two years ago, in her spine, it was espe-

Cathy Scheibe was a 20-year survivor of uterine cancer when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005. She underwent a mastectomy and chemotherapy and was treated with the drug Herceptin for about a year. She is currently cancer-free.



what not to do

(continued)

DON'T blurt out horror stories.

Laura Livingston Rubin still shudders when she thinks of the time one person, upon learning that she had breast cancer, launched into a story of how her cousin had skin cancer, then chemotherapy, which led to leukemia and, eventually, death: "Just what you want to hear when you're about to start chemo, right?"

DON'T use war metaphors.

Some women talk about "fighting" the disease, but others chafe at words like *fight* and *battle* when describing breast cancer treatment—particularly if the disease has returned. It can make her feel like the recurrence is somehow her fault, as if she didn't fight hard enough. Listen for cues in the way your friend talks. If she mentions "attacking the disease on all fronts," then feel free. Your best bet, no matter what, is simply to ask, "How are you doing?"

DON'T say things like "You'll be OK."

While you may be trying to be upbeat, Lizanne Kelley says, this only makes her feel worse: "People don't know what it's like to face cancer daily. The depression and the anxiety can be overwhelming."



Angela Agbasi found a lump in her breast in 2001, while she was pregnant with her fourth child. Diagnosed with stage 2 breast cancer, she delivered her son four weeks early and immediately underwent a radical mastectomy and chemotherapy. More than six years later, she is cancer-free.

cially terrifying. "The first time you're diagnosed and treated, they say, 'OK, we got it all—you can move on,'" says Lizanne. "Once you're rediagnosed, they say there's no cure. It's a whole different mind-set." That's when a family friend pulled Georgia aside. "She told her, 'No matter what happens, we're here for you, forever,'" Lizanne recalls. "That meant the world to me."

take a memo

When a doctor announces that you have breast cancer, it's hard to hear much else. Your mind starts spinning so fast that everything can sound like gibberish. For this reason, Laura says, having her sister-in-law Karolann accompany her to every doctor's appointment was invaluable. "She brought an orange silk-covered notebook with her and filled it with doctors' names, fax numbers, and insurance forms," says Laura. "You're dealing with oncologists, radiologists, gynecologists, surgeons. To have all that information in one place was genius."

Since Cathy's four children are scattered across the country, from New York to Oregon, she was particularly relieved when her colleague Janelle offered to accompany her to doctor's meetings.

"I was so emotionally involved, I could not even hear straight, let alone remember everything," she says. "Janelle took notes that I could reference later, when my head was clear."

And sometimes patients need more than just a note taker—they need an advocate. When Amy, Cathy's 43-year-old daughter in New York City, heard that her mother was going to have to wait eight weeks for an operation in Fargo, North Dakota, she found a specialist elsewhere who could do the surgery sooner.

understand her physical changes

The irony of breast cancer is that the treatment feels much worse than the cancer itself. "I didn't feel sick until after the cancer was removed," Beth says. After Beth had a double mastectomy, she woke up "bandaged and sore, with drains sticking out of my armpits." She had to sleep sitting up for two weeks. "I stayed on the couch, and Todd [her future husband] slept on the floor," she says. "I'd have to wake him to give me an oxycodone because I couldn't lift my arms or twist open the bottle."

Once she had healed from the surgery, Beth still had chemotherapy to face. "I was dreading it," she says. "But then a clump of hair came out in my hands in the shower. I wanted to control this side effect before it controlled me." So Beth called her best friend, Jenn, whose own mother had died of cancer, and asked her to come over to cut her hair. "Jenn gave me a mullet, then a Mohawk," Beth says. "We were laughing at first, but by the time she finally cut it all off, we were both in floods of tears. But it felt good to be proactive and even better to be with a friend who understood."

behave normally

After her surgery, Beth returned to work; she was still undergoing chemotherapy but didn't want coworkers to view her as a sick person. "I put on my wig and acted like I always did," she says. "And they treated me as they had before my diagnosis, which was great." She also wanted everyone else in her life to do the same—and they did. When Jenn was pregnant and visiting her mother-in-law in the hospital, she called on Beth to give her a lift

tip Chemotherapy leaves many patients with "metal mouth," an enduring tinny taste. A thoughtful gift: a stash of minty gum balls or lemon drops.

home. "I love that she didn't even think twice to ask!" says Beth.

Beth's boyfriend, Todd, didn't let cancer hamper their relationship, either. "I had my last chemo session on December 22," says Beth, "and he proposed on Christmas Day—bald head and all. He said, 'Short hair or no hair, I love you.'" The couple got married the following November, which for Beth was the "light at the end of the tunnel."

stick around

When Angela finished her treatment, "the phone calls and visits tapered off because everyone thought, *'She did it! But I was still taking pills, still struggling,'*" says Angela. It's often at this point, patients say, that fighting cancer becomes unexpectedly difficult. In Angela's case, she was taking tamoxifen, which can induce menopausal symptoms; it brought on what she calls "chemically induced emotional breakdowns." She needed sup-

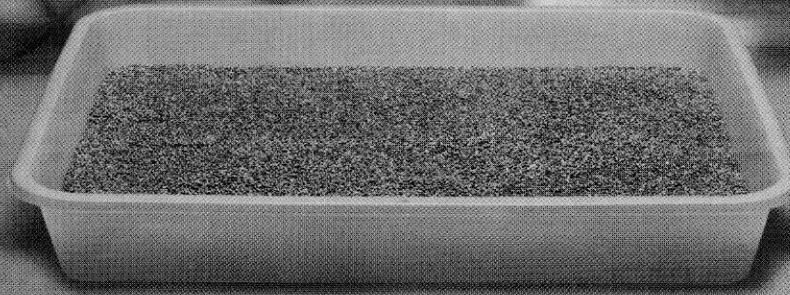
port then more than ever: "Friends who called just to say 'How are you doing?' helped me get through that rough patch."

Cathy received many get-well-soon notes early on, including one from Sue, a woman who works at her local drugstore and is also a breast cancer survivor. But what really amazed her was that Sue continued to send notes as time wore on. "She would almost intuitively know when I needed them," says Cathy. They were often just words of encouragement, urging Cathy to remember to pamper herself, take naps, and simply know that she was not alone.

take her away from it all

While most women with cancer have no choice but to continue on with their busy lives, a break is always welcome. Laura's first surgery was scheduled for the day after Thanksgiving, and instead of accepting invitations to holiday dinners from fam-

**YESTERDAY:
ALL LITTERS PROMISED
BETTER ODOR CONTROL.**



ily and friends, she went with her friend Elena to get a massage. "She found the only spa in Manhattan that was open on Thanksgiving Day," says Laura.

Lizanne was in the thick of chemotherapy when her cousin Debbie invited her to the house in Maine where they had spent many summer vacations. "As awful as I was feeling, it was comforting to be in a place that was so familiar," Lizanne says. When the cancer returned, Debbie invited Lizanne back to Maine with her sister Carol and a few friends. "We listened to music, drank wine, and talked about old times," says Lizanne. "That weekend was a gift."

provide some comic relief

Breast cancer is terrifying, but laughter can be an incredible release. That's why friends with a funny bone were so important to Cathy. When she had her first surgery, a cousin and a colleague went with her. "They were teasing me because I was more scared of the IV than anything else," says Cathy.

"Somehow we laughed about it all, which took away a lot of the fear I had been feeling." After the mastectomy, it was Cathy's daughter who cracked her up: "I woke up to Amy giggling. She thought it was hilarious to see me so doped up on drugs. And then I started laughing, too. With such a horrid disease, you have to laugh!"

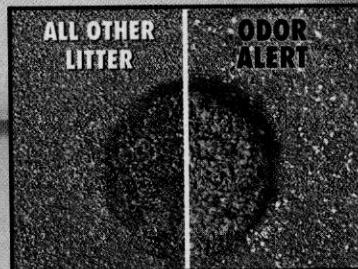
celebrate recovery milestones

Once you've had cancer, it remains in your life forever. "Two years after the initial removal of the cancer with no recurrence, I was labeled in remission," says Laura. "After five years, I was considered cured." Even then, being aware that your friend is probably living with a fear of her cancer recurring can make her feel cared for and not forgotten. Laura was especially touched when, exactly two years after her initial diagnosis, she received a beautiful bouquet of pink roses from her friend with a note that read, "Rubin's Remission Roses."



Show how
you care To
share the ways in which
you helped someone
cope with an illness,
go to www.realsimple.com/cancersupport.

TODAY: ARM & HAMMER® ODOR ALERT™ SEE ODOR BEFORE YOU SMELL IT.



BEYOND CLUMPING TO BREAKTHROUGH ODOR CONTROL.