

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a white shirt, sitting on a grey couch and holding the hands of a young girl with brown braids, wearing a teal shirt. They are both looking down at their hands. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a white shelving unit.

Crossroads4Hope's **Suggestions for Adults**

Working with Kids & Teens Impacted by Cancer



3 Crossroads Drive, Bedminster, NJ 07921 | 908-658-5400
support4families@crossroads4hope.org | crossroads4hope.org | [@cr4hope](https://twitter.com/cr4hope)

Definitely Do!

Ensure Privacy and Confidentiality

Schools can be tight circles, and child\teens are curious, but it is paramount to setting them up for success that they know what they share with you is a private conversation (unless of course they implicate the intent or a prior experience of harm to themselves or others). If you have any concerns, raise them to team members who are directly involved in the care of the minor at your institution or home.

Get Permission from the Family

Whether it is you or another staff member, ensure that the family is involved and has given you permission to share or speak about certain information, or address the subject at all. This is especially important because some families will share information with school support personnel that the child/teen may not even know yet. It is also possible that part of the child's coping plan, they have asked for all of their teachers to be informed, but they do not want it to be brought up to them in school. It is incredibly important to be aware of and respect the family's wishes.

Use Real Words Like: Cancer, Chemotherapy and Death

Every family has a different way that they relate to their experience (especially when dealing with an advanced diagnosis or a death), and you want to make sure that you are as direct and close to facts as possible to ensure you are not opening a conversation the family may not be comfortable with.

Model Emotional Expression

Don't hold back emotions if you are feeling it. You want to prevent a child or teen to be comforting you, but you are also a person, and showing them that you are feeling emotion is a healthy and honest way to show that you care about them and their lived experience. It can also show them that it is acceptable to experience big feelings, and you are a safe person for them to show those feelings.



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Show Compassion and Understanding

Coping with a challenging life event like cancer or a loss takes a lot of energy, which leaves less energy and focus for school and other responsibilities. Please make the appropriate accommodations to ensure that you are showing your student compassion with assignments, exams and behaviors in class while they learn healthy coping mechanisms that can help them move forward.

Create a Safe Space for Them

This may look like sharing when your room (or another room) is empty so they have a quiet space, telling them that they can let you know when they need a break, creating a hall pass for them to visit the nurse or counselors, or telling them where they can use a phone to call home (and allowing them to do that as much as they may need).

Most Importantly, Take Care of You!

Most importantly, take care of you! You cannot care for others going through something really challenging, unless you take care of yourself first and acknowledge how the interactions impact you. In addition, should you have your own experience of being impacted by cancer, please do not hesitate to get support to reflect on how connecting with this student may bring up your own emotions. Whether it looks like some extra self care, looking to colleagues for support, or connecting with a professional to process your experience, please ensure that you are focused on your support needs also!



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What to Avoid

Using "At Least" Phrases

Any phrase that begins with "at least" such as "at least it's an early stage" or "at least you were prepared" or "at least she's not in pain." These statements minimize feelings and experiences of grief and loss. We want to make sure to validate everything that the teen is feeling, and phrases that begin with "at least" can project feelings instead of accepting them.

Feeling the Need to Fill the Silence

With children/teens who are experiencing grief, loss, or other responses to the impact of cancer, being with them but allowing them to process silently can be extremely beneficial. It is likely that their entire day is filled with thoughts of their experience and people bringing it up to them, and giving them a break from the need to share, gives them time to work through their feelings, while also knowing that you are there if they need to say something out loud.

Telling Them What They Need

Every person and family is different. Coping mechanisms are unique to each person, and it is likely you only know a small piece of what their life looks like. Naming coping mechanisms that may not be helpful for them can have the opposite effect than you may hope for, and make them feel even more misunderstood or alone. Let them tell you what they need.

Comparing Personal Experiences of Either Your Own or Another Person

While in some circumstances this can be helpful, it can more often than not be less helpful and more harmful. We never want to lessen their experience due to the fact that others also experience something similar. Comparisons usually only connect one aspect of an experience, and the "worthiness" of some feelings can then be compared as well, which is something we want to prevent, because we want kids/teens to get the message that all feelings are valid.



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What to Avoid

Making Assumptions

Please only base your interactions and communication on information you know to be true, instead of information you assume to be true.

Singling Out the Student

Most kids/teens would prefer for their normal interactions and routine to continue. This is a coping mechanism that allows their brain to return to "regularly scheduled programming" where they know what to expect, when so much has been out of their norm and control. Even with the best of intentions, this many children/teens can feel even more isolation when they are put on the spot, or treated differently, without a request or preparation.

Speaking About the Child/Teen/Family in Public Spaces

Please ensure you are in a private space (closed doors) when you are speaking to or about the student. It is possible that they have different interactions with different people based on comfort level and respecting that is highly important for maintaining trust and respect. In addition, in some settings overhearing is the easiest way to spread rumors and create additional isolation or false information.

Avoiding Them Because You Don't Know What to Say

When they are aware that you have been informed of what is going on in their home life, and you have been given permission to address them about it, it's better to say "I don't know what to say, other than that I am so sorry for what you are going through" or "nothing I say is going to help, but I am here to listen", than nothing at all. They need people to be present for them. If you are aware and have not been given permission to address them, please continue your normal communications, and allow them the opportunity to come to you if needed.