

The Best Medicine: Why Having a Circle of Friends Is Crucial for Caregivers

Facing the cancer battle of a loved one is a daunting task, especially when you're a primary caregiver. During this difficult time, you can't overestimate the importance of having the unconditional support of friends.

By Joni Aldrich

“Friends, you and me...you brought another friend...and then there were three...we started our group...our circle of friends...and like that circle...there is no beginning or end.”

~Eleanor Roosevelt

When you contemplate the significance of a circle, there are many associations that come to mind, including the phrase “circle of life.” In reality, circles have always had both spiritual and mystical significance, dating back to the beginning of time. Consider the circular shape of Stonehenge. Then look up into the sky and see the two spherical shapes of the moon and the sun.

Much closer to home than celestial orbs is our “circle of friends.” When you think about it, in this hectic time of work, work, work—well, friends are a rare commodity indeed. You see, friendships have to be nurtured or they'll wither and fade. That takes additional work and a lot of heart, because there are times in life when friendships are tested and tried. When cancer invades your life or the life of a family member or friend, the true meaning of “friendship” becomes apparent. At no time in life are friends more valuable than when your world has been invaded by the shock and crisis of a life-threatening disease.

In 2004, my husband, Gordon, was diagnosed with cancer. In one day, my life changed completely. Thankfully, my friends didn't. They were my “constant.” They were there to remind me that I was loved and that I was never alone, and they were there to make sure that my burden was never more than what I could bear.

There were many days when my friends literally kept me sane. The cancer years were full of agonizing struggles. I vividly remember one of the worst days, when Gordon's first oncologist called me at work and told me that he had given up on my husband. I asked if we should seek treatment elsewhere. The doctor responded that it was now a “salvage operation.” And I fell apart. My friend Becky immediately came to my aid and helped me get out of the office. She calmed me enough so that I was able to make it home without hitting a tree. What would have happened, if she had not been there to support me?

Here are some suggestions for helping a friend during a traumatic cancer crisis:

Make sure that your friend is aware that you want to be helpful and involved. Having a friend who volunteers to help and upon whom a caregiver can depend is critical. This doesn't mean that you have to be "clingy"—just call and visit often.

Don't wait to be asked to bring things. People are sometimes too proud and self-sufficient to accept help when it's offered, and sometimes they might be unable to articulate even to themselves what they need. If you're going to visit, why not take a pot of soup, a casserole, or muffins along with you? These items can be frozen and used later if they are not needed immediately.

Consider a care package of staples. Flowers, cards, and other traditional "thinking of you" gifts will always be appreciated by caregiving friends, but keep in mind that the items caregivers need most are more mundane. Non-perishable food is always good to have on hand, or you could pick up a box of tissues, paper towels, or any item that tends to be used up quickly. You might also consider providing supplies for the patient: alcohol swabs, lip balm, unscented skin moisturizer, hand sanitizer, a warm blanket—all these things are inexpensive, but useful.

Friends have to be available for "consultation" 24/7. Emotions don't keep regular working, or even waking, hours. No, you may not like that call in the middle of the night, but that might be the time your friend needs you the most. She might simply be unable to sleep, or she might be sitting up in the emergency room or the surgical waiting room at some unusual hours. Since those occasions are often unexpected, your friend will probably be alone—*technically*. Being a true friend means that you have your "available" sign on, no matter what time it is.

Aid is especially important when the patient is receiving treatment out of town. The patient's needs and concerns, and those of his family, grow exponentially when it becomes necessary to leave home for treatment. Many new complications present themselves, such as mail that needs to be collected, pet care, and yard work. If these responsibilities are shared between dependable friends, the load becomes more bearable.

In my book *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95), I include a "Wall of Dedication to My Girls. This dedication came directly from my heart to all of the wonderful ladies who got me through the most trying times of my life. Since my situation ended tragically with the loss of Gordon, my friends formed the cornerstone of rebuilding my life without him.

I would not have been able to make it through had they not been there for me, unconditionally. I try to remember that every day and offer my support to others who may need help. "My girls" have become my daily inspiration.

###

About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* and *The Losing of Gordon* for most of her life. As a child, she was a better than average student. She wrote dramatic poetry. Before college, she worked at a newspaper. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. She has also been able to incorporate her love of photography into the design of her books. She feels it is her destiny to relay this true story to readers in a way that will help them in their own difficult trials.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight Journal*.

For more information, please visit www.thecancerlifeline.com or www.griefbeacon.com.

About the Books:

The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95) and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief"* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392649-3-5, \$15.95) are available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.