

3 BIG Questions: with Cindy Sheridan-Murphy

Lending support during serious illness

By **Debbie Gardner**

dgardner@thereminder.com

Cindy Sheridan Murphy is the founder of Each Moment We're Alive (EMWA), a community-driven organization providing peer-to-peer cancer support during and after cancer treatments. It offers a safe space for survivors to connect, share their journeys, and access programs that foster healing, empowerment, and guidance through cancer navigation and beyond.



Prime asked Murphy and members of her support groups for guidance on how someone can help support a loved one or friend facing a serious diagnosis. Here's what they shared:

Q: *Getting the diagnosis for a serious illness is always a shock to the individual. It can also be a shock to friends and family. What are some first steps to support the newly-diagnosed?*

"Supporting someone newly diagnosed with a serious illness requires sensitivity, empathy, and understanding. Here are some essential first steps to help them navigate this challenging time:

1. *Listen and offer emotional support:* Be present, validate their emotions, and avoid dismissive clichés. Simply listening and showing empathy can be very comforting.
2. *Provide practical help:* Assist with daily tasks, accompany them to appointments, and organize support from others for meals or transportation.
3. *Respect their need for space:* Allow them time to process their diagnosis, and let them control the pace and detail of conversations about their illness.
4. *Encourage support groups and information-seeking at their pace:* Encourage support groups: I have found talking to people who have been through breast cancer very helpful, although different kinds, it gave me hope that people get to the other side and are living healthy, productive lives again. Help them find trustworthy information and guide them towards professional support when they're ready.
5. *Manage your own reactions:* Handle your emotions privately, maintain a calm demeanor, and provide genuine support without false optimism.
6. *Stay in touch :* Stay in touch regularly, and suggest low-pressure social activities to help them feel less isolated."

Q: *Needs change as a person goes through treatment and recovery. Are there appropriate ways to ask what types of help the person might need – or want?*

"Ultimately, showing compassion, respect, and a willingness to adapt to their needs is the best way to support someone after a serious diagnosis. Here are some suggestions,

1. *Ask open-ended questions:* Inquire about their needs with questions like, "What can I do to make things easier for you right now?"
2. *Offer specific help:* Instead of a general offer, suggest specific ways you can assist, such as bringing dinner or accompanying them to an appointment.
3. *Provide emotional support first:* Offer your presence and be available to talk, which can help them identify what they need.

4. *Respect their autonomy:* If they decline help, respect their wishes and let them know you're available when needed.
5. *Check in regularly:* Gently check in to remind them of your ongoing support without being pushy."

Q: The caregivers and friends may be on the sidelines, but they see the effects of what the patient is going through. What coping strategies might these individuals use to get themselves through their loved one's illness?

"Supporting someone with a serious illness is emotionally and physically draining, but taking care of yourself is just as important as caring for them. By recognizing your own needs and finding healthy coping mechanisms through some of these strategies you can sustain yourself through this challenging journey.

1. *Set boundaries:* Know your limits, avoid guilt, and communicate what you can and can't handle.
2. *Seek support:* Join a support group or seek professional counseling to help process your emotions and reduce stress. Allow yourself to feel a range of emotions and express them through conversation, therapy, or journaling.
3. *Practice self-care:* Prioritize your health by eating well, staying active, sleeping, and taking breaks for enjoyable activities. Stay in touch with friends and family for emotional support and avoid isolation
4. *Ask for help:* Delegate caregiving tasks and use resources like respite care to share the load.
5. *Find meaning:* Remember the love and care driving your efforts, and focus on the positive impact you're making."

Editor's Note: Each Moment We're Alive (EMWA) is a nonprofit cancer support network which offers support and wellness programs from diagnosis to recovery. While their main focus remains on supporting women with cancer, EMWA also connects men and children to suitable support groups within their network. Understanding that cancer impacts not only the individual but also their loved ones, EMWA is dedicated to aiding the entire family unit during these challenging times. For more information about the programs EMWA provides, visit eachmomentwerealive.org