How to Help a Cancer Patient During the Holidays

December 17, 2017 By Justin Birckbichler

As I said last year, I absolutely love the holiday season. This year, I'm able to focus solely on embracing the joy and merriment, but that wasn't necessarily the case last year. Despite the grueling days of chemo and all its side effects, I did my best to maintain my Christmas spirit. As I look back, I realized that there were certain things that helped me a lot during the holidays. The following list details ways loved ones can support a cancer patient during this time of year.

Do things for them

Cancer treatments take a lot out of you, both physically and mentally. I didn't always have the strength to do things or the mental fortitude to carry out traditional holiday tasks. I needed help, but I didn't necessarily want to admit defeat and ask.

My brother, Kyle, was still at my house after Thanksgiving, which is the only acceptable time to begin setting up for Christmas. Since I was still recovering from my orchiectomy, I physically couldn't put up our wooden reindeer in my front yard. Kyle noticed this and asked if he could put them up for me. Unfortunately, I didn't have an excuse for making him do it again this year

Similarly, my ABSOT partner, Katie, knows that I watch a different Christmas movie (including Die Hard, Iron Man 3, and Lethal Weapon) leading up to the big day. Usually, I spent hours arranging the movies and making sure it made sense (Home Alone 2 can't be watched before Home Alone). Knowing that my mind was focused elsewhere, Katie asked if she could make the list for me this year. She ended up creating a really cool digital advent calendar, complete with GIFs to represent movies each day. (This year, I wrapped the DVDs so it's a surprise every day!)

In both cases, I appreciated that they asked me before doing it. In my post "How to Talk to a Cancer Patient," I shared that it's important to offer specific help, but I did appreciate having the final say on what was done for me. Furthermore, both of them accepted input on what I wanted. Kyle asked where I wanted the reindeer, while Katie asked if I had specific requests for certain movies on certain days (the only two concrete days are The Muppet Christmas Carol on Christmas Eve and A Christmas Story on Christmas Day).

What can you do for the cancer patient in your life? Think about what they have done to celebrate on past holidays and ask them if you can help create the same amount of cheer this year.

Do things with them

One big thing I struggled with during treatment was the feeling of total dependence. I'm sure I'm not alone in this, so help the patient regain their sense of independence by doing holidays activities alongside them.

The day after Kyle set up the reindeer, it was time to decorate the tree. Since I was going to be spending most of my time in my bedroom, I wanted my Avengers themed tree up there. I wanted to decorate it myself, but I knew I couldn't carry a tree upstairs, open the ornament boxes, and so on and so forth without getting exhausted. My mom, knowing how important this was to me, stepped in to help and said, "Do you want to do this together?" She brought the tree upstairs, opened the boxes, and then handed me the ornaments. I got to put the ornaments where I chose, including placing Iron Man so he looks like he's battling Captain America.

Whether it's decorating the tree, making cookies, or something else, be on the lookout for something that you know your cancer patient wants to do and can do, but may need help completing. It's a small gesture, but it will mean the world to them.

Let them do things for you

Another favorite of my many holiday traditions is creating an ugly Christmas sweater. I've made some doozies in the past, and last year I was determined to do the same. Mallory told me that her school was hosting a competition and asked if I wanted to help make hers. I told her that not only would I help, I wanted to do it myself.

Over the course of a few days, I designed and built a fireplace sweater, complete with a three-dimensional mantle, battery-operated lights, and fake candles. Spoiler - she won the competition.

A small gesture, like this or the time I made pizza from scratch for my mom and Mal, are moments I look back on as major wins. Cancer patients don't always need everyone doing everything for them, so let them do something nice for you when they offer.

Bring on the presents

It wouldn't be a Christmas post without the mention of presents. Small things can help brighten a patient's whole day

The gift that made me laugh most came from my friend Quinn. Along with a Kylo Ren care package, he sent what appeared to be a coin purse. Upon closer inspection, it was a dried kangaroo's scrotum from Australia.

But not all gifts need to be cancer related. Another friend got me a memory foam body pillow upon hearing I had difficulty sleeping. Listen to what the cancer patient needs. We don't all need another "Cancer Sucks" shirt, but there may be something else that we can use to help make life a little easier during chemo.

Be the cheer

I take Christmas cheer to insane levels, but not all cancer patients feel the same. Help them find the sense of joy. There are plenty of holiday song playlists to choose from, or maybe you can drive them through the neighborhood of lights.

One thing to possibly avoid—making every conversation about cancer. Sometimes we just want to forget and enjoy the spirit of the season. Sure, it's ok to ask about it and how they're doing, but don't dwell on their diagnosis.

However…

Respect that they might not be so cheerful

The holidays can be tough for someone with cancer. Sometimes they have to be quarantined from from others due to germs, they may look differently than normal, or any number of reminders that life is anything but normal. These feelings are totally ok, and it's also ok to not understand what a cancer patient is going through. Be cognizant of this and be the friend they need you to be. Don't make a hard situation worse by demanding that they show Christmas cheer and positivity at all times.

Even though I love the Christmas season so much, I personally understand that it can be a trying time. I'm not currently in treatment, cancer is still never far from my mind. I'm about twelve days away from my twelve-month scan, which is not as great of a gift as turtle doves or lords a-leapin'. I'm doing what I can to not dwell on these thoughts.

Nevertheless, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year in my opinion and I hope these tips help others to find the same joy. I look forward to it all year round, and this year is no different. To be honest, I think it's in my blood. I firmly believe that in a past life I was a little drummer boy…

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