How to be a friend to a friend who's sick or grieving

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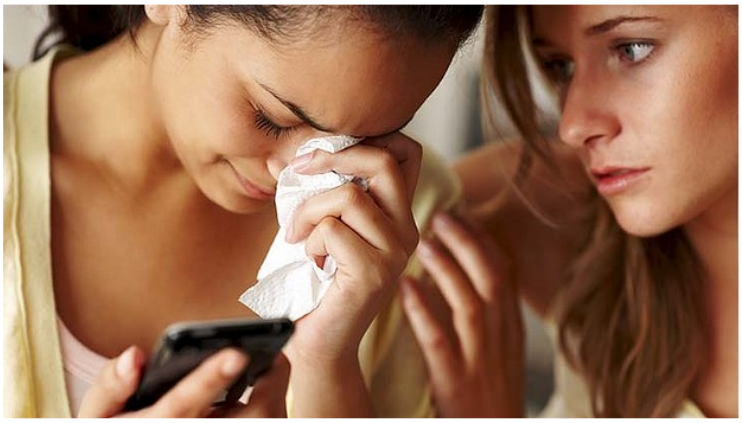

Grief: sometimes you can't fix the problem.

When Letty Cottin Pogrebin was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2009, she became fascinated by the reactions of those around her. The last thing she expected was to lose friends. While some friends coped, others "seemed ill at ease, and still others actually pulled away from me or disappeared altogether as if my cancer were catching" says the US writer and lecturer.

"The ones who made me feel worse were those who treated me as if I was 'cancer girl' - as if my illness had become my entire identity, or as if I were doomed. One person, when I first told her my diagnosis, actually asked, 'Is it terminal?'"

Pogrebin says the reason why some people struggle to deal with a friend who is sick or grieving is because "witnessing our friends' suffering arouses our own repressed sense of vulnerability and fear of death".

Letty Cottin Pogrebin. *Photo: Getty*

Keren Ludski, the manager of the bereavement counselling and support service at the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement in Victoria, agrees that it is hard to know how to offer support to a grieving or sick friend. "It is difficult not to use our own frame of reference, our own experiences, beliefs and fears. Often this leaves the support person feeling vulnerable and helpless. We tend to be a society that likes to 'fix' things and when we find ourselves in the position where we are unable to 'fix' the situation we may find this incredibly confronting."

To discover why some of her friends were, as she says, "awkward, inarticulate or insensitive" Pogrebin decided to write a book. She interviewed more than 80 people, those who were physically ill, and "people who'd been sick at heart either because of financial ruin, worry about a family member's illness, or the loss of a loved one". They told her what was helpful as well as what they wished their friends had said or done. *How to Be A Friend to A Friend Who's Sick* was published in April.

"We try to be useful because it's hard to be passive in the face of a friend's anguish or pain,"

she says. "We struggle with our own powerlessness which is deeply unsettling to us and often makes us behave in bizarre ways, for instance by being overly solicitous or by infantilising the sick person. ('Have you gone wee-wee yet?' is one unforgettable baby-talk line)." She also recalls a women she interviewed who had undergone a mastectomy being told by a friend, "Well at least you're married".

She says when friends don't know what to say, they give advice such as "You should try acupuncture" or "My aunt had that disease and she took megadoses of Vitamin C".

"When we are really scared or worried about a friend we resort to clichés like 'I'm sure you'll be fine' or 'It could be worse'. But none of these comments is helpful to the patient; these words just make the friend feel better."

Pogrebin says "the friends who were most helpful were those who were direct and honest about their own feelings - those who said how sorry they were that I had to go through this ordeal, and who made it clear that they really wanted to be helpful, they weren't just mouthing off. What friends need is caring friendship, a listening ear, and a heightened sensitivity to their needs".

Rhondalynn Korolak, a 45-year-old from Melbourne, is supporting her best friend who has breast cancer and lives in Canada. She talks to her friend each week on the telephone and has mobilised a crowd-sourcing website to get more than $12,000 in donations to support her medical expenses. "I am primarily there to support her in her choices and also to help if I can with communicating her situation to friends and fundraising if needed," she says.

Korolak says because both women have lost someone close to them, "there are no secrets, fears or vulnerabilities that we haven't already shared and experienced together.

"I don't feel the need to fill the air with clichés or platitudes. What I want is for her to know that I am here to listen (or to talk) about anything and everything. There were so many things left unsaid when my mother died. I never want to be in that position again. I want to make sure that we've left no stone unturned, no topic undiscussed, no feelings left unshared."

To help friends step up to the challenge of being supportive, Ludski suggests the following:

- Listen to them, without any judgement, if they want to open up. The best form of support is a compassionate ear.

- If they don't feel like talking, don't push them. Sometimes you are providing comfort by just being there.

- Emotional support can be given in the form of human touch, holding the person's hand or simply giving them a hug.

- Keep in contact, even just by phone.

- Don't change the subject if the deceased/illness comes up in conversation. If you are supporting a grieving person use the name of the deceased in conversation so that your friend knows that his/her loved one has not been forgotten.

- If you are unsure as to how to support your friend, ask them to tell you.

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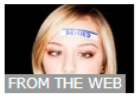

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