

- ♦ ***Be patient with emotional meltdowns.*** If physicians have not been able to diagnose your friend's condition, s/he is probably suffering both emotionally and physically. It can be terrifying and maddening not to know what's wrong. Help with finding or researching appropriate medical professionals. Offer to attend appointments.
- ♦ ***Stay in the role of supportive friend.*** Don't suggest your own diagnosis or theory of what is

# Chronic Illness

## Helping Your Friends

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wrong, unless it's well-supported by research and provides an avenue your friend can use in working with a physician or medical professional.

- ♦ ***Remember pets.*** Ask if you can take your friend's pet to the vet, or for grooming, or walks. Pets are part of the family and a great source of comfort. We may need help caring for them sometimes.
- ♦ ***Help with everyday life.*** Bring over a simple meal or offer to run errands. You can ask your friend what common tasks they need help with.

Remember that it's sometimes hard to accept help, so ask gently. The gift of your time is precious.

“Nothing is more important than empathy for another human being’s suffering. Nothing. Not career, not wealth, not intelligence, certainly not status. We have to feel for one another if we are going to survive with dignity.”

—Audrey Hepburn

- ♦ ***Keep your friend involved.*** Help your friend stay engaged with you and the community in low energy ways. It's important but sometimes hard for your friend to stay involved, when the activities offered require more energy than s/he can muster. Be creative in thinking of other ways s/he can be a part of things. For example, I appreciate it when friend from church texts me a picture of the prayer board. This keeps me connected to others: I can always pray when I can't do much else.
- ♦ ***Adjust to shifts in emotion.*** Your friend's life may be an emotional roller coaster at times. Listen and be patient with the emotional changes. One day s/he may be emotionally strong and sailing along; the next, s/he may be angry or in despair. Sometimes, s/he may just want to hibernate. Don't take any of this personally.
- ♦ ***Pay attention to indications your friend may be struggling to cope.*** If you become concerned about a more serious-seeming inability to cope, you might tactfully suggest seeking support from a professional counselor. If you're not comfortable making such a suggestion, try to think of someone who would be able to have that discussion with your friend—perhaps their medical practitioner or a member of their clergy.

- ✦ ***Don't pity.*** Remember that most people don't want pity. They want compassion, respect for their struggles, and reassurance that family and friends will remain committed to the relationship. Even if you're being sympathetic, pity feels belittling, not empowering.
- ✦ ***Recognize that life has changed.*** Your friend must grieve the loss of the old life and build a new life, with a new reality. This means your relationship must also transform to adapt to the limits of a chronic or lingering health condition. Reassure your friend in words of your commitment but, most importantly, by developing new rhythms and activities that fit with the present restrictions of life.
- ✦ ***Keep from being judgmental.*** It hurts to decline invitations or to cancel plans at the last minute. It's embarrassing when our houses or yards are unkempt. Understand that we may discourage you from coming over, if that's the case. Accept our limits with kind words, not criticism.
- ✦ ***Be sensitive to the spiritual perspective.*** Don't preach or proselytize if you don't share common faith beliefs with your friend. If you are a person of faith, you can always pray for his or her health strength and recovery.

