

Marissa Henley has written an excellent resource for those of us who have friends struggling with cancer. This will now be the first place I'll go as I seek to care for people with not only cancer, but any serious illness. Marissa's practical helps are worth the price of the book.

—**Dave Furman**, senior pastor, Redeemer Church of Dubai;
author, *Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting*
and *Kiss the Wave: Embracing God in Your Trials*

This immanently practical book gives gospel-infused advice from a fellow pilgrim who has been shepherded through the valley of the shadow of death. Marissa calls the body of Christ to engage head, heart, and hands for the purpose of coming alongside those who are suffering.

—**Karen Hodge**, PCA women's ministry coordinator

Marissa reminds us that the One who created us has not abandoned our friend—or us. Our friend's cancer diagnosis provides an opportunity for us to gently move toward them, share the love of Christ by being his hands and feet, and enter into their suffering in the same way Jesus entered into ours. It is a journey worth taking, and this book is an excellent travel guide.

—**Brian Holt**, president and CEO, Hope Cancer Resources

When you walk beside someone with the life-changing diagnosis of cancer, knowing what to do and say is so difficult. As a professional counselor, I am excited for people in that position to have the honest perspective that Marissa brings to these difficult circumstances. And on a personal note, as someone who has lost three family members to cancer over the past three years, I wish I'd had this book to share with our community.

—**Michelle Nietert**, clinical director, Community Counseling Associates; Counselor Thoughts podcaster; speaker; author

Anyone who's been touched by cancer, to any degree, will be helped and comforted by this beautiful book. Marissa addresses a difficult, life-changing battle with eloquence, truth, and intense practicality, inviting us into her cancer story and to the God who is her hope. I see Jesus in Marissa as she proclaims him through her sufferings, and I pray he will equip many readers through her wise counsel in these pages.

—**Kristen Wetherell**, coauthor, *Hope When It Hurts: Biblical Reflections to Help You Grasp God's Purpose in Your Suffering*

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L O V I N G
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*Moving beyond "I'm Sorry"
to Meaningful Support*

M A R I S S A H E N L E Y



P U B L I S H I N G

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To my friends,

who battled cancer with me,
walk through survivorship with me,
and teach me by example how to love others with cancer.

*The evil that hurts us now will be the
eventual servant of our joy and glory eternally.*

—Tim Keller, in Be Still, My Soul

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Preface

The phone rings, and your heart stops. You look down at the screen and see the name of your dear friend who has been waiting for biopsy results. As your shaking fingers fumble to answer the call, your heart cries out a silent prayer.

You immediately hear the shock and sadness in her voice. You know even before she utters the words. “It’s cancer.”

On a Monday afternoon in October 2010, my friends and family received this phone call from me. I was an energetic mom of three young children and never imagined that by Thanksgiving I would be incapable of caring for my family. As I battled cancer for the next nine months, my friends shouldered the responsibility of all that I was suddenly powerless to do. They cared for my home and my family, and they ministered to my heart and soul. In fact, they should be the ones writing this book. They are the true experts. But I think they may still be playing catch-up from the time they spent running my life back then, so they left the book-writing up to me.

As a cancer survivor, I hear this question often: “A friend of mine was just diagnosed with cancer. How can I help? How do I support her? I’m so afraid I’ll do or say the wrong thing!” Since you’re reading this, you’re probably asking these same questions. I wish we could sit down over a cup of coffee and talk face-to-face. I’d ask you about your friend. I’d ask you about her family, her treatment, and her unique challenges.

Preface

We would sip our lattes and you'd tell me how heartbroken you are for her. My eyes would fill with tears, because I've been there—as the one with cancer, but also as the friend wondering how to help.

These pages contain the conversation I wish we could have about your friend—what she's experiencing and how you can support her. I'm eager to introduce you to several of my cancer-surviving friends and to share the stories of how their friends supported them through their illness and survivorship. I hope their stories will expand on my own to give you a richer understanding of the experience of cancer.

In addition to the practical information you'll find in each chapter, I've included resources at the back of the book that explore the biblical foundations of suffering and community. Our beliefs drive our behavior, even as we care for those with cancer. We are the body of Christ, and caring for the sick is a responsibility we should approach with thoughtfulness and intentionality. As we live in community and love those with cancer, even the support that we provide is done in community with others. You are not alone in this tough assignment of supporting your friend through cancer. I'm grateful to be on your team!

If you're looking for the short version, I'd tell you to be there for your friend for the long haul, ask questions instead of making assumptions, listen to her, and love her well. But if you want to dig deeper, keep reading. As you read the stories and suggestions, please remember that every person is different, every family is different, and every cancer is different. My hope for the guidance and examples I share within these pages is that they will help you develop your own plan to care for your friend. (You'll find questions at the end of each chapter to help you apply what you're learning to your friend's unique situation.) Together, we will equip you to be a better friend.

Preface

We will broaden your perspective on life-threatening illnesses. And we will prepare your heart to respond with love to your friend's suffering.

Your friend's situation is unique, so remember to approach her as a unique person. If she's fiercely independent and stubborn, make gentle offers of assistance and be patient. If relationships energize her, arrange a lunch out with friends to lift her spirits. If she cherishes order and organization, perhaps you can love her best by cleaning and organizing her pantry or kids' closets. Consider honestly the closeness of your friendship with her, and be careful not to force a level of intimacy with your offers of help that might make her uncomfortable. (Chapter 2 provides guidelines for this.)

My purpose in this book is not to convince you to take the burden off your friend's back and place it on your own. You will not be able to meet all her needs. You are just one link in the chain of support that God is assembling around her. Please avoid the temptation to view this book as a to-do list. Although I hope it will give ideas that you can use and share with others, you cannot do everything mentioned in this book. If you begin to feel overwhelmed, turn to chapter 3 and read more about how you won't be doing everything for your friend. Take the suggestions in this book and add your own prayers for wisdom and your unique knowledge of your friend, and you will be ready to walk compassionately beside your friend through her illness.

Acknowledgments

Writing a book is not an individual sport. You would not be holding this book in your hands if it weren't for my team of family, friends, cheerleaders, interviewees, and professionals. So, before we go any further, I'd like to thank them for getting us to this point.

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To the fighters, survivors, and caregivers who shared their cancer experiences with me, some of whom are mentioned by name in these pages and others of whom contributed to the principles and suggestions I give: Crystal, Bev, Samantha, Becky, Lisa, Debbie, Liz, Jamie, Kristi, Marilyn, Anna, Alexis, Ashley, Courtney, Jess, Pam, Aimee, John, Sara, Mary, Billy, Ed, Marni, Lesley, Karen, Lisa, and Janet. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. I hope I have stewarded them well.

To Amanda, Ashley, Courtney, Erin, Jenny, Jessica, Lynette,

Acknowledgments

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To my kids: Thank you for sharing me with this project and for having total confidence in my efforts. I pray that someday you use the gifts God’s given you for his glory and for the good of his kingdom.

To my husband, Noel, who endured sub-par dinners, unfolded laundry, and an extremely distracted wife for months while I wrote this manuscript: You never doubted whether or not this was a good idea, even when I did. Thank you for being my most amazing supporter.

To my friends and family who walked with me through cancer and the years following: You know who you are, and you know how much I love you. You built a beautiful house of selfless compassion in my life with Christ as the foundation. In this book, I have simply cut a window in the wall to let others look in and see what you’ve done. By blessing me, you are now blessing others. It’s an honor to be your friend.

To God alone be the glory.

Introduction

I'm so sorry you picked up this book. Can we start there? Let's begin by acknowledging the reason you're reading this. Your loved one has cancer, or you have cancer—or you fear you've made friendship mistakes in the past and you want to be prepared next time, because you know cancer won't stay away from your circle of friends for long. I desperately wish no one ever needed to read this book—I *hate* cancer. But until we cure cancer or Jesus returns, we need to struggle through this together. We need information, ideas, prayer, strength, and free-flowing forgiveness as we seek to support our friends with cancer.

I wish I could go back and talk to my 2010 self. I would sit down across from a frightened, bald young mom as the chemo dripped into her veins. I'd show her pictures from 2017, when she has hair past her shoulders and kids who are old enough to remember the memories she's making with them. I'd tell her that she will be raising a teenager, enjoying her forties, and writing a book. She would never believe me. She'd laugh in disbelief to hear that she will parasail for her fortieth birthday, watch her son star in the school musical, and even cave when her kids beg for a puppy. If I told her all that, she would never believe me. In that moment, she was just hanging on from day to day. I wish she could know what was yet to come.

As much as I'd love to visit my 2010 self, I'd like even more

to visit my 2009 self. She stands by the kitchen sink with her face in her hands, absorbing the news of her sister-in-law's breast cancer diagnosis. As two preschool-age boys run around her and the newborn wakes from a nap, she wonders how she can possibly help. How can she serve? What should she say? What should she not say? She has no clue.

My 2009 self got some of it right. She organized meals. She took care of her two-year-old niece on Fridays to give other family members a reprieve. She checked on her sister-in-law regularly and tried to offer words of comfort.

My 2009 self also got a lot of it wrong. I would love to go back and tell 2009 Marissa to shut her mouth and listen more. I'd tell her to stop using Bible verses to dismiss her sister-in-law's pain. To stop trying to talk her out of being scared. And to *please* stop comparing chemo-related nausea and fatigue to that which she experienced during her recent, healthy pregnancy.

One problem that 2009 Marissa faced was that she didn't understand what her sister-in-law was experiencing. I'd like to think that if my sister-in-law had been diagnosed in 2011, after I had gained firsthand knowledge of what cancer feels like, my support would have shown more compassion and creativity, as well as offering practical and emotional solutions, because it would have flowed from a better understanding of what truly helps.

Even today I make missteps. Words sometimes pop out of my mouth without enough forethought, and I wish I could take them back. And everyone is different—words and actions that helped and supported me might not be what another person truly wants or needs. But it is definitely easier to know how to love and support someone going through cancer when you've walked that road yourself. I have. And I'm here to share with you my best ideas and solutions.

If you are a friend seeking to love someone with cancer,

Introduction

I hope this book will be a great substitute for firsthand experience. I want to pull back the curtain and show you what it feels like to have cancer and what your friend needs. I was a young mom when I had cancer, but you'll find information in this book that is relevant to all ages and stages. If you're a survivor who wants to learn more, I'm ready with stories from several cancer-fighters and caregivers that will give you fresh ideas. If you're a cancer-fighter or caregiver who needs to make sense of what you're feeling and experiencing, I wrote this book for you, too. Whatever your reason for picking up this book, I pray that it ministers to you and encourages you.

Cancer is a painful topic, and I've taken care to write with sensitivity. Unfortunately, addressing this subject adequately requires touching on subjects relating to medical procedures, hospitalization, illness, end-of-life care, and even death. Some of these topics may be particularly difficult for you to read about. I wish it didn't have to be that way. Before one copy of this book was printed, I prayed Romans 15:13 for you: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope." As we push through these hard topics together, I'm in this with you. And, more importantly, the power of the Holy Spirit will fill you with joy and hope. He will hold us fast as we enter the storm of suffering.



When Cancer Strikes a Friendship

Facing Your New Assignment

The Phone Call

When I describe my cancer experience, October 25, 2010, is the day I share in the most detail—because those are the details I will never forget. I had just finished giving instructions to a babysitter before leaving for a parent-teacher conference at my first-grader’s school. My phone rang, and I saw that it was the radiologist who had biopsied the lump in my breast a few days earlier.

I hurried to my bedroom to answer the call. As I stood by my bed, I heard the doctor say, “I’m sorry, Marissa; this is a tumor.” He explained that it wasn’t breast cancer but rather cancer in the lining of the blood vessels—a rare and aggressive cancer called angiosarcoma. I sat on the edge of the bed and searched in my nightstand for a paper and pen. I’d never heard this strange word before and needed him to spell it. As he explained more, I rushed to the computer and typed it into Google. But my mind was too shocked to read anything on the screen. Concerned by my silence, the doctor asked if I was okay. I said, “I’m not sure if you’re telling me I have one year,

or five years, or what.” His reply was not reassuring: “We just don’t know yet.”

It was the day before my thirty-fourth birthday. My boys were ages six and four, and my baby girl was not yet eighteen months old. And, when I ended the call with the doctor and turned my attention to the computer screen, I read that only 30 percent of those diagnosed with this disease live for five years. I slammed my laptop shut. The first of many tears began falling as I begged the Lord to let me walk my baby into first grade. It was my earnest prayer for months and then years, and still is today: “Lord, please let me live to see my babies grow up. Please, Lord. Please.”

In my shock and grief, the Lord poured out comfort and peace through his Word and through the prayers and encouragement of others. Two weeks after my diagnosis, I wrote about that difficult day in my online CaringBridge journal:

That afternoon is kind of a blur. I remember during one of the early phone calls, I was starting to lose it and just started repeating out loud, ‘God is good. God is good. God is good.’ All I could do in those first terrible moments was to cling to what I knew to be true about God. I knew that everything I had known to be true about His character, His power, His love for me and His faithfulness were still just as true as it had been hours before. I knew from what we had been studying in Isaiah that God had given me this assignment for His glory and for my good. Because I belong to God in Christ, nothing can separate me from His love.

Due to the rare and aggressive nature of the cancer, I received treatment at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, Texas, six hundred miles from my hometown. The first step in my nine-month treatment plan was high doses of

chemotherapy. Every three weeks, I received four straight days of chemo, including a pump that I wore around the clock. The first two rounds took place in my hometown. After those initial rounds, a CT scan showed significant shrinking of the tumor. This was great news for my long-term prognosis. If chemo shrank the tumor, then we could hope it was destroying lingering cancer cells that could metastasize in the future.

But then we learned that I needed to enroll in a clinical trial to receive the rest of the chemo, and I started spending two out of every three weeks in Houston. At that time, I wasn't sure I would live long enough for my daughter to remember me. I didn't want to spend any of the time I had left in a Houston hospital room. But I didn't have a choice. I spent nine weeks away from my family and missed New Year's, Valentine's Day, and all three of my kids' birthdays. The logistical challenges were daunting. And yet the Lord provided for every need, and my friends pitched in both in Houston and at home to care for us. (You'll read all about their kindness and support in the following chapters—I can't wait to tell you more!)

When I was home, I was usually weak and sick, requiring several blood transfusions and dealing with complications from having low red blood cells, white blood cells, and platelets. I needed countless injections, blood draws, and medications. I visited some sort of health care facility almost every day, with no hair, no eyebrows, no eyelashes, and a central line coming out of my chest.

After seven rounds of chemo, the tumor had shrunk to almost nothing, and my body couldn't take any more of the harsh drugs. The next step was radiation: five days a week for five weeks, in Houston. I hated spending more time away from home, but I felt much better physically. We brought the kids to Houston for two weeks and explored the city together. It was almost like a family vacation, except for the time each day

when I lay inside a machine and had a high-energy beam of radiation shot at my life-threatening tumor.

Following radiation, I returned home for several weeks. My hometown doctors struggled to get my platelets, which were still devastated from chemo, high enough for me to have surgery. In July 2011, I returned to Houston for a mastectomy. The Lord used the skilled hands of my surgeon to remove the last traces of cancer from my body with widely clear margins.

And then, ten months after that phone call, I heard a cancer survivor's four favorite words: "No evidence of disease." By God's grace, I remain cancer-free today.

My Friends Carried My Load

My friends began caring for me within hours of my diagnosis. One friend folded laundry in my bedroom while I made endless phone calls, and another friend silently cooked spaghetti in my kitchen. We were all in shock.

In the days that followed, I kept apologizing to my friends. I knew they were distraught and their lives would be challenging in the coming months. The year before, I had walked the road of cancer with my sister-in-law, and I knew the sacrifices that would be required of my friends. Finally, one of my best friends sat me down and said, "Marissa, you keep telling us this is an assignment for you from the Lord. Well, he didn't give this assignment only to you. He gave us this assignment, too. We are ready. We are in this with you. So stop apologizing to us."

Over the next several months, my friends sacrificed and suffered with me. Sometimes one of them refers to that time as "when we had cancer," and then tries to correct herself by saying, "I mean, when you had cancer." And every time, I tell her, "No, we had cancer together."

God repeatedly showed us he was going to meet each and every one of our needs, just as he had promised. He placed us in a caring community in the town where my husband and I were born and raised. He surrounded us with a wide circle of loving friends through our church family, our neighbors, my husband's colleagues, our parents' churches, and a small Christian school that acted like another church family. He used an army of friends, family, acquaintances, and even strangers to provide tangible, emotional, and spiritual support as we battled for my health and for my life. Every time our challenges seemed insurmountable, the Lord revealed the next step in his plan to provide for us.

None of my friends could meet all my needs, but they each did what they could. They brought meals to our family three nights a week for eight months. They drove my kids to school, preschool, piano lessons, and play dates. They traveled to Houston to care for me during chemo. They put my name on prayer lists all over the country. They sent texts, emails, and cards to remind me I was loved. They listened compassionately as I struggled with grief, anger, fear, and stress. God wove my friends' threads of support into a beautiful tapestry to provide for all our needs.

A Tale of Two Parties

The day after my diagnosis—my thirty-fourth birthday—a friend picked me up and delivered me to a surprise party like no other. My arrival wasn't met with shouts of "Surprise!" but rather with lingering hugs from friends with tear-stained cheeks. Our toddlers played at our feet while we munched on snacks that had been hurriedly purchased the night before. I opened my gifts: stacks of paper plates to get my family through the difficult months to come and hand lotion

to battle dry skin during chemotherapy. I had to step away from the party a few times in order to take phone calls from medical offices and to set up tests for the next day. And the party concluded with a lengthy time of weepy prayers as we pleaded with the Lord for comfort, peace, wisdom, and healing. Through the entire party, I kept wondering if I would live to see my thirty-fifth birthday. Would I be celebrating again with friends, or would it be a day of mourning as they marked my first birthday in heaven?

One year later, a crowd gathered on the lawn of a country house on a gorgeous October afternoon. Two of my childhood friends had flown in from Texas and California to throw me a thirty-fifth birthday party and celebrate my survival. There were only happy tears as guests filled their plates from a buffet of my favorite appetizers and desserts and listened to touching and humorous tributes. My denim skirt hung from my still-too-thin frame as everyone complimented the short, curly hair I had recently freed from underneath my wig. In my mind, my future was still uncertain. I expected a cancer recurrence at any time and didn't think I would live to see my fortieth birthday. But I was thankful for the Lord's healing. I was eager to give God the glory and praise for bringing me through the trial and preserving my life.

The battle of the previous year had been lengthy, painful, overwhelming, and emotional. And yet the Lord had proved faithful and present in each grueling step. My friends were there on the darkest days when I faced the reality of my prognosis and its implications for my young family. They were there on the days when I grasped at normalcy and wanted to be treated like a regular mom. They cried with me, prayed for me, and served my family tirelessly. I hope, as you read the stories throughout this book, you will feel equipped and inspired to love your friend through cancer as well as my friends loved me.

Questions for Reflection

1. Which of the “First Steps of Support,” on the following page, could you take to help your friend today?
2. My friend said that God hadn’t given the assignment of cancer to me as an individual—he had given this assignment to me and my community. What do you think about this statement?
3. God has given you specific gifts to be used to minister to your friend. What tangible, emotional, or spiritual resources has the Lord given you that you can share with her? You can write these down in Resource 1.1 (pg. 202).

FIRST STEPS OF SUPPORT

As you continue reading, here are some first steps you can take as you seek to respond to your friend's diagnosis with compassionate support:

- Pray for her. She needs your prayers more than anything—prayers for healing, strength, and support, for the ability to accept help, and for her relationship with the Lord. Chapter 10 provides specific ways to pray for your friend and specific Scriptures to use in your prayers.
- Offer to take her a meal (if she's an acquaintance) or set up an online meal calendar for her (if she's one of your closest friends).
- Drop off a large package of paper plates, breakfast or lunch items, or restaurant gift cards.
- Send a card in the mail letting her know you are praying for her.
- Don't assume that you know what she's feeling. Instead, ask questions and be prepared to listen well. You might want to skim chapter 4 to help you prepare for these conversations.