

When people say the wrong thing



If you have early-stage cancer, you might be on the receiving end of insensitive remarks. Find the perfect comebacks here. BY JEN SINGER

Nancy Loughery, 52, will never forget what happened when she joined an online support group after being diagnosed with Stage II kidney cancer. “I received several painfully ugly private messages telling me I had no place in that group because I had no idea what it was like to be staring death in the face,” recalls Nancy, a massage therapist in Clearwater,

FL, whose cancer was caught early enough that her odds of survival were good but late enough that her surgeon recommended she stay up-to-date on clinical trials. (She’s been cancer-free since she had surgery to remove her left kidney.) “Hurt, I stopped posting, but I continued to watch for other early-stage patients so I could message them privately and offer support and hope.”

Unfortunately, it’s not unusual for family, friends and even doctors to minimize the experiences of patients with treatable, early-stage cancers. Sometimes their comments can be downright hurtful. These comebacks can come in handy if you’re ever on the receiving end of a thoughtless remark.

Comment “At least you don’t need chemo or radiation.”

Four years ago, Scott Farbman, 41, was diagnosed with Stage I papillary thyroid cancer, which has a 10-year survival rate of 95%. “When I was diagnosed, I was told, *It’s not a huge thing. You don’t need chemo.*” recalls the Montclair, NJ, chief information officer. As a result, he didn’t prepare himself for how it would affect him emotionally: “It was still *cancer*; the disease changed my outlook and shifted my priorities.” Now cancer free, he says, “I didn’t expect to be completely changed by the diagnosis.”



Comeback “It may be an easy physical treatment, but it’s emotionally trying.”

“Cancer is a wake-up call, no matter what the prognosis,” says Ann Fairchild, LCSW, president of the Association of Oncology Social Work, a nonprofit group in Philadelphia. It can take time for patients to heal emotionally.

Fairchild advises using whatever coping mechanism works best for you, whether it’s talking with other survivors, getting counseling, writing in a journal or seeking spiritual guidance.

Comment “You have a good cancer.”

Three years ago, Chad Morton, 32, a stay-at-home dad from Indianapolis, was diagnosed with Stage III Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a blood cancer with a 93% five-year survival rate for people under age 45. His tumors had grown quickly, so he was prescribed 12 rounds of chemotherapy. First, though, he had to have surgery to implant a port. It was painful, and Chad broke down, telling his wife and sister, “I don’t know if I can do this.”

Suddenly, a doctor burst into the room and blasted him: “Listen, I have patients on the other side of this wall who might not make it through the day. You have the *good cancer*. Suck it up!”

“We were stunned and really upset,” recalls Chad.



Comeback “My odds are good, but the diagnosis and treatments are scary for me.”

“Keep in mind, doctors have to process their own feelings about multiple patients’ cancer diagnoses, not just yours,” points out Mindy Greenstein, PhD, a psycho-oncologist in New York City. “And doctors have bad days, too.” Still, it’s important to discuss your feelings, since patients whose fears are dismissed may be reluctant to share important information about their disease—like a treatment’s side effects—with their healthcare provider, says Dr. Greenstein. “They worry they will be seen

as whiners.” So make an appointment with a hospital or cancer center psychologist or social worker, who can help you process your feelings and act as an advocate.

Comment “Your cancer was caught early, so you don’t need to worry about it.”

When Dianna Smoljan, 50, was diagnosed with an early melanoma three years ago, she thought, *Wow, I’ve gotten really lucky twice.* More than two decades earlier, the public relations consultant from Mokena, IL, had been diagnosed with cervical carcinoma in situ, a Stage 0 cancer that was removed in her gynecologist’s office.

Left untreated, melanoma becomes life threatening. In fact, Dianna’s dermatologist told her that her husband had saved her life by spotting the irregularity on her back early. “When all is quiet and you allow yourself to think, the *what ifs* overtake you,” she says. “Yet you feel bad for wanting someone to understand, because you know it could have been worse. Most people said things like, *Oh, you had a mole removed.* People tend to dismiss early-stage cancers as, *It’s early. It’s out. You’ll be fine.*”



Comeback “I was lucky to find it early, but I still need to sort through my feelings.”

“Support is a double-edged sword,” says Dr. Greenstein. “When you have cancer, people will say the wrong things now and then. It’s part of our culture to minimize the bad stuff in life.”

She suggests sending an email to loved ones explaining how you feel and how you would like to be treated. Consider saying, *It’s not important what you say. It’s what you say next.* “It’s the discussion that makes a difference in how you’re going to feel afterward,” she says. 📧

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