

## How to be a Friend to a Friend Who's Sick

Letty Cottin Pogrebin      New York: PublicAffairs, 2013

This practical guide to communicating with sick friends addresses the test of friendship - how to deal with *what happens when illness becomes a third party in a relationship*. Two books, reviewed in my earlier blogs, are cited as recommended readings: Susan Halpern's (2004) ***Etiquette of Illness*** and Will Schwalbe's (2012) ***End of Life Book Club***.

Pogrebin analyzes her own experience after diagnosis and during treatment for cancer plus 80 in-depth interviews with other sick people, mostly undertaken in the waiting room during her course of daily radiation treatments.

Her theme can be stated in three memorable words: Ask and Act. Not all sick people want the same amount or kind of attention. Even more importantly, the same person does not want the same from every friend, or in every situation.

The most interesting, unique aspect of the book is the brief section ending the book on Collective Caring. Pogrebin offers examples of the best of friends operating together – support group, 150 friends via website, 15-member helping circle, Council of Dads, 40-person meditation farewell, 30 friends' web of support, friends of Jim club, Kimberly's gurus, It takes a Village friends, and the Fab Five. With the Internet, it is so much easier these days to coordinate such group support. These stories challenge our imaginations for helping a very sick friend together.

*Even when there's something I need done, why, when my friends ask what they can do for me, do I always say, "Nothing"?* Having just had a cast on my wrist, I too found an inquiring look helped me past this automatic reaction – toward a specific request for needed help.

Like Halpern, Pogrebin addresses the 'How are you' problem. She warns especially of asking this in a portentous tone of voice. Interviewees prefer an opening such as "It's good to see you today." This should *not be a robotic question but instead a genuine expression of interest, and the asker should be prepared for a longer than average answer*.

### Selected Communication Don'ts

1. *Avoid self-referential comments or anecdotes*
2. *Don't stand above the bed. Sit at eye level. Sick and well are not superior and inferior, just sick and well. Similarly, don't infantilize.*
3. *We who are trying to heal sometimes feel held back in the effort by friends who persist in perceiving us and addressing us as if we're still sick. As we process their words or sense their attitude, it becomes a measure of our progress back to health and 'normality'.*

### Selected Communication Do's

1. *Three things you ought to be able to say, simply and forthrightly, to someone who's sick:*
  - a. *"Tell me what's helpful and what's not."*
  - b. *"Tell me if you want to be alone and when you want company."*
  - c. *"Tell me what to bring and when to leave."*
2. *When offering your company in the waiting room for frequent treatments, or whatever: Make sure you mean it when you say you're willing to accompany a friend or sit there no matter how long it takes – and make sure the patient understands that they can accept your offer of company when they want it and decline when they don't without you being insulted.*
3. *Seven lines sick people DO want to hear*  
[expressing empathy, availability, or both].  
*I'm so sorry this happened to you.*  
*Tell me how I can help.*  
*I'm here if you want to talk.*  
*Just give me my marching orders.*  
*That sounds awful; I can't even imagine the pain.*  
*I'm bringing dinner.*  
*You must be desperate for some quiet time. I'll take your kids on Saturday.*
4. *On gift giving: bring your friends something that might elicit the sensation [sick people] find most elusive during illness: pleasure. Whether it's culinary, literary, bodily, spiritual, or sensual, whether it provides diversion, relief, comfort, luxury, or laughter, uncomplicated pleasure is what sick people miss most.*

All in all, this book is a useful new volume on communicating with sick friends, especially in terms of collective caring. The older Halpern book, however, is a richer resource built on years of personal illness and thoughtful social work with chronically ill patients.