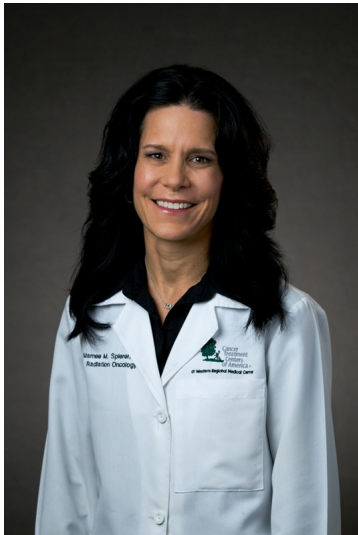


## What Not To Ask a Breast Cancer Patient (And What To Say Instead)

Written by Dr. Marnee Spierer  
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### When a “Let me know if there is anything I can do for you” isn’t enough.

As a radiation oncologist specializing in breast cancer treatment, I am well-acquainted with the emotional rollercoaster that often accompanies the disease. In fact, my colleagues at Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Goodyear often refer to the work we do as “one-part cancer treatment and many parts emotional support.” Breast cancer is an incredibly emotionally charged disease, and it uniquely strips patients of the control they’ve clung to their entire lives.

Anyone who has been on this planet for more than five minutes would likely agree that it is the kiss of death to tell a woman how she should eat, respond or behave. Yet, all too often patients’ friends and family members do just that. When confronted with suffering or setbacks in those we love, it is human nature to extend vague offers to help or provide well-intentioned advice. But in my experience, based on hundreds of patients’ stories, these well-meaning entreaties are not exactly well-received by patients.

Don’t say “Let me know if there is anything I can do for you.” Instead, say something concrete like “Unless you tell me otherwise, I’ll be at your kids’ school pickup every Tuesday, and I’ll take them to soccer.” Along the same lines, don’t say “I’m sure you have some dietary restrictions, but let me know if I can make dinner sometime.” Instead, say “I’m bringing dinner for your family every Thursday; tell me what is off-limits.” Offer specific, definitive support that is phrased declaratively. Do not give open-ended offers. (Honestly, how many women do you know who if you ask, “let me know if there is anything I can do for you” will respond with “pick up my kids from school and take them to soccer.” Very few and maybe only to their absolute best friends. We are a proud group!) Do not offer advice. “I read you should eat this. I heard you should absolutely stay away from that.” Resist that urge. Let her cancer care team take care of that.

Your focus here should be on listening, not telling. If you do ask questions, ask specific ones; not “how are you feeling?” (We should already know the answer to that.) Resist the urge to say, “You’re so strong—you’ll beat this!” While some cancers are beatable, the reality is that some are not, and that is a big burden for a woman. She thinks “everyone says I can beat this because I am strong; if I don’t beat it, I guess I wasn’t strong enough.” Wrong. Instead, let her know you are a safe place for her to vent, break-down and show her vulnerable side. Tell her this is not only OK but it is expected. We are so used to controlling all aspects of our days. When this control is taken away from us, it feels incredibly unnatural and it is hard. Often, this can be as challenging as treatment itself. The control comes back; it is just temporarily on hold.

In addition to an empathetic support network of friends and family, which is absolutely vital, patients are best served by a smart, evidence-based care team that combines cutting-edge treatment with unbelievable emotional support. At CTCA, that kind of whole-person, patient-centered approach informs every decision we make for our patients, whether they’re currently treating or are survivors of the disease. We are proud of our commitment to patients’ emotional well-being that spans from their initial diagnosis to survivorship.

### To Learn More

Cancer Treatment Centers of America [cancercenter.com](http://cancercenter.com).