How can I help a friend who thinks they have cancer get help? [1]

Dear Alice,

I have a friend who thinks he may have testicular cancer. I am the only person who knows. He is really embarrassed about it and refuses to tell anyone else. But I think his main problem is that he’s afraid of what would happen next if it turns out that he did. I'll often tell him that its not that embarrassing and he can tell his parents, but since I'm a girl, I just dont understand.

I have tried absolutly everything to make him tell someone, anyone really. But he wont. I am truly scared for him and have no idea what I would do without him. What should I do? Thanks for taking the time to read this, I really arppreciate it and could really use the help. E

Answer

Dear E,

First of all, kudos to you for being a supportive and approachable friend. The thought of a friend’s potentially serious illness must indeed be difficult and painful for you, and it is great that you are hanging in there and trying to help him out. It may be helpful for your friend to know that testicular cancer is one of the most treatable cancers out there if caught early. It may also be helpful for him to know that testicular cancer is the single most common form of cancer affecting males in the U.S. ages 15-34. So while he may be embarrassed about it, he is certainly not alone. Testicular cancer:

- Most frequently impacts white males between the ages of 15-34.
- Can be hereditary. A family history of testicular cancer can increase one’s risk, but many men who are diagnosed do not have such a history.
- Is more treatable when diagnosed early.
- Is most often discovered by the patient, but seeing a physician is necessary to rule out other explanations for whatever symptoms a patient is experiencing.

It sounds like your friend is doing some self-diagnosis. While symptoms of testicular cancer may include a lump in just one testicle (which may be painful, but is more likely to be painless), a general feeling of heaviness in the scrotum, a slight stomachache, an ache in the groin, fatigue and/or fluid in the scrotum, these symptoms may not necessarily mean that your friend has testicular cancer. Only a doctor, after performing a series of diagnostic tests, can tell him for sure.
Of course, the decision to tell or not to tell someone — including his clinician — rests with him.

Paying attention to your friend’s behavior and treatment of the subject may help you to best help him. How long has he been talking with you about this? Have you noticed any changes in how he talks about it? Often times when people get bad news, they can be reluctant to take immediate action, but over time, they may be more likely to do something about it.

So what’s the best thing for you to do? If maintaining his trust is important to you, it may be best to continue to gently remind him that you are thinking about him and worried about his well being. The words you used in your question were powerful — that you care about him and you are afraid of losing him. If you haven’t already, consider telling him this and reminding him that there are likely others in his life who feel the same way. Telling him how his actions (or inactions in this case) are impacting you may be a good communication strategy. In doing this, you are not telling him what to do; instead, you are simply communicating how it makes you feel. While you don’t want to bombard him, checking in about it regularly may be helpful in reminding him that you care and are concerned. Trust yourself to know how often and in what settings to bring it up.

Hopefully, with a little loving assistance from you, he will come to a place where he is ready to tell a health care provider. Try to avoid blaming yourself if he doesn’t. Remember, he is his own person and the decision is ultimately his.

Take care,

Alice!

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