TALKING WITH CANCER PATIENTS:
SUGGESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

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TWO PERSPECTIVES

• On a personal level, cancer is stressful and life-altering.
• On an intellectual level, cancer can be fascinating.
• Embrace both perspectives in this class.
There are 16,000,000 cancer survivors in the United States. Every cancer, every situation, and every individual is different.
COMMON THEMES

• Everyone is scared
• Being diagnosed with cancer is like traveling to a foreign country where you don’t understand the language or customs
• It affects the entire family
• It’s unbelievably expensive
- Be cautious of using military analogies. (e.g., “He lost his battle with cancer.”)
- Don’t use euphemisms like “the Big C.” We know that we have cancer.
- In this class, it’s not a matter of “dumbing down” the science. It’s finding a common language.
- But don’t get too self-conscious about your language. What’s in your heart comes through.
ASK US QUESTIONS!

• We want to share with you!
• This is a safe place to make mistakes.
A FEW PHRASES THAT DO MAKE US CRINGE

- “Don’t worry – you’ll be fine.”
- “You have to stay positive.”
DON’T ASSUME PEOPLE WILL BE RATIONAL

• Even very bright and otherwise rational people will make unexpected decisions when diagnosed with cancer.
SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS

• Don’t ask for medical advice. The students aren’t physicians, and the physicians who do attend are not there for that purpose.

• Ask questions. Part of the rationale for the course is to give students practice in explaining science to the public.

• If you have a science background, remember that we’d rather learn about the science from the students and faculty.
• Remember that the students are students. Be supportive and kind.
• Don’t focus exclusively on your own cancer.
• We encourage community members to share their own cancer experiences throughout the semester, but don’t overshare. These aren’t medical students. They don’t need to know every gory detail.
• Bring positive energy to the class.
SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENTS

• Be professional. Always follow-through with your commitments.
• Be engaged during the class. Don’t go through your email or otherwise distract yourself and your neighbors.
• Know that it’s ok to ask questions to community members. We want to share with you.
• Bring positive energy to the class.
We’re happy that you are in this class!