

Friends IN NEED

How do you show your support for people you love who are in crisis? There are as many different ways as there are different people, says Josephine Brouard

Vigil photographs by Tim Bauer

I've just returned from hospital after an ultrasound to check a change in the condition of my breasts since I last had a mammogram.

All morning, I've been holding my breath. Rather than thinking, 'why me?' I've been thinking, 'why *not* me?' Lately, enough friends and family members have been weighed down by personal health crises for me to start feeling that good health and a positive prognosis should be considered a bonus in life rather than a given.

When the doctor finally gave me the all clear, I felt a cool, calming wave of relief wash over me. I've always tried to live my life as if I've just been told I only had six months to live - this experience only served to intensify my feelings of gratefulness to be alive.

My friend, Sharon, on the other hand, is alarmingly close to death. Forty-two years of age and larger-than-life, my Titian-haired pal was diagnosed with bowel cancer about a year ago and underwent some brutal rounds of chemo and radiotherapy.

In response to this life-changing experience, Sharon scaled down dramatically the amount that she worked, spent more time with her husband and boys, 10 and 6 respectively, and concentrated on exercising, eating well and thinking positively. About a year later, the cancer returned in the form of a heinous tumour that inflicted

intense pain as it greedily grew. Drastic surgery was mooted - but the doctors and specialists were candid: Sharon's chances did not look good.

I cannot begin to describe how courageous my friend Sharon has been in the face of such devastating news. She still laughs a lot more than most people. She prefers not to have what she calls 'cancer faces' around her; and she doesn't seek pity or grieving unless it naturally flows. All of this leaves her circle of friends in awe. But we're also frustrated, angry, very sad and frighteningly powerless in the face of her fierce invader.

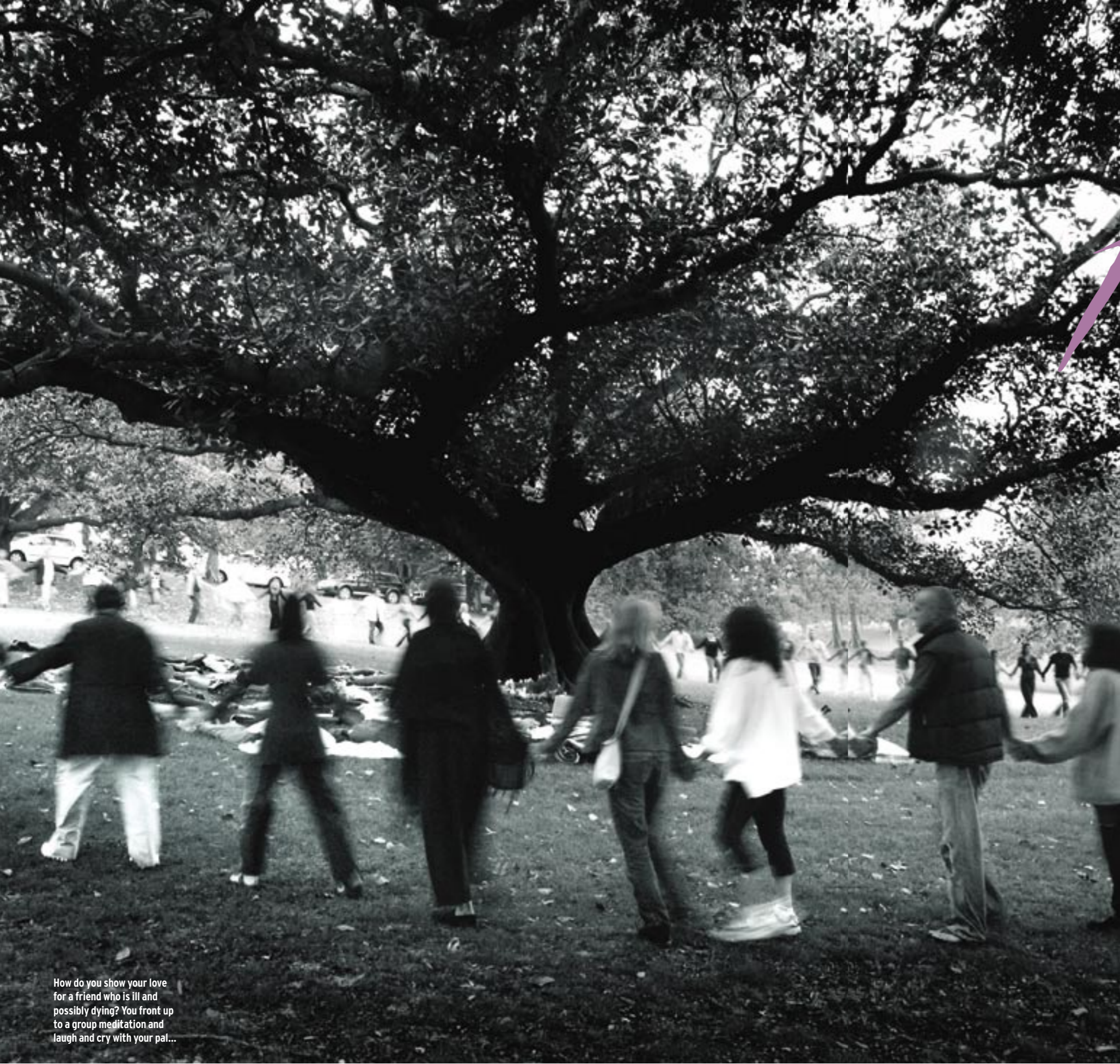
Sharon's friends decided to hold a vigil in a Sydney park one Sunday morning: scores of devoted pals gathered in dawn's gloom

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to burn candles and offer prayers in a group demonstration of our love and in a hopeful bid for a miracle: oh, to make that tumour shrivel and go away!

Many tears were wept and many chuckles chuckled as we told Sharon, sitting in our midst, how much we loved her, what a lioness she was, and how much she was teaching us about living and dying.

Sharon sang a song with her husband, wept with us, and thanked us for all the



How do you show your love for a friend who is ill and possibly dying? You front up to a group meditation and laugh and cry with your pal...



Friends of Sharon (right) held a vigil at dawn for their sick friend who later died, while the article's author (right) took time out to bond with her parents when Alzheimer's transformed her mother and left her father in need of respite from all the caring.



memories we'd shared together. "I've been drunk with lots of you!" she exclaimed, and we all nodded with smiles at the truth in that.

Since the vigil, I've felt courageous enough to edge closer to Sharon as she and her family tackle her illness and prepare themselves for the inevitable. In many

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respects, many of us felt, post-vigil, as if we had already attended our darling friend's funeral. Sharon herself said so, which was ironic for one who had once laughingly declared, to the chagrin of a friend whose mother had just died, "I don't do funerals!"

Sharon's friends were shocked at the time at Sharon's apparent sang-froid, yet such an attitude illustrates how differently each of us approaches the issues of life and death. After all, what use are everyone's kind words if you're not there anymore to hear them? How can we infuse more love into our life? And how do we infuse the process of death with life?

All sorts of such unspoken questions hover in the air when a very close friend sits at my dining room table the very same week and confides that his progressive muscular disease is deteriorating. Hot tears squeeze from the side of his eyes as he voices his fears about becoming debilitated and dependent. His concern for his partner and

children, and all those who love and depend on him, is palpable as he speaks.

I fumble hesitantly as I try to find words of comfort. None of the usual platitudes like "you'll be fine, wait and see, you'll be OK" seem to apply; instead I find myself gazing at my friend's familiar face, wondering with bemusement how he - and his close circle of friends - are going to deal with things should the worst-case scenario materialise. A flame of trepidation burns in my chest: in times of trouble,

I ask myself, am I up to the task of being a truly supportive friend?

Certainly, there's no Operations Manual for helping in a crisis, nor any well-worn map to steer you on your way. For starters, how a person reacts in a crisis seems to be as personal, unique and varied as our multifarious personalities and quirks.

My friend Stephen tends to keep his travails to himself. Only a tight circle of intimates is privy to the frustration and fear that overwhelm him on a vulnerable day. When I tell him that I feel useless, he says he feels stronger simply because I listened.

While Stephen prefers one-on-one talks, Sharon appears to draw strength from numbers. At our vigil, she willingly discusses the size of her tumour and admits she is frightened. When she catches sight of the beautiful face of her son, she shares her emphatic conviction: "I'm not ready to go".

Very often, it is the carers who are the most stoic of all. How else do you

explain how Sharon's husband, Jayson, can painstakingly teach his boys to play with new yoyos in the kitchen while his wife, prostrate on a mat in the sitting-room, strains to imbibe the chants of eight Buddhist monks who have specially flown in to visit her bedside?

This is a husband who gently suggests how friends can be truly useful in a situation when the only things that matter now to Sharon are emotional sustenance, regular bowel movements and pain relief. "Don't bring pasta," he says pragmatically, "she needs lots of organic juices." You nod, dumbly, relieved to be given some useful role. And so you rush off to buy another load of ginger, garlic, greens and carrots.

When a crisis hits one's own family, it's a lot easier to leap in where others would fear to tread. But even then, again, there's a limit to what can be achieved in the face of fate's implacable forces.

Before Sharon and Stephen's crises deepened, I returned home to visit my parents after it became clear that my mother had Alzheimer's and we needed to take stock. After several puzzling transoceanic conversations with my mother and enigmatic discussions with Dad, I jumped on a 'plane.

Mum was waiting at the front door when I arrived: with lop-sided hair, mismatched clothes and makeup erratically crayoned



FRIENDS IN DEED

Know someone in crisis? Here are a few pointers about what people appreciate when the chips are down.

on her face, it was easy to see she was not the woman she had once been. Becoming easily confused, her conversation was a monologue of endlessly repeated questions with the answers, frustratingly, mentally noted for a fraction in time...

As the eldest child, I have long been accustomed to taking charge, so yet again, I did. Every now and then however, I became aware that my efficiency was disempowering my overwrought father. It

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was all very well to come up with solutions and to put them into practice, but when I boarded a plane to return to the refuge of my own family life back in Australia, mum and dad would still be together, muddling along as best as they could.

When a friend proffered information about various specialist doctors who practice miracle therapies for Alzheimer's, my father protested to me: "I'm sick of all this advice. Tell people to leave me alone! We are doing everything possible that we can..."

I empathised with Dad. When you're dealing with life-and-death issues, less advice-giving and more practical doing is generally more helpful. As a family, we felt bolstered when people gave us a sense that they truly cared. And we got that feeling when people were consistent. Consistently calling; consistently dropping in; consistently doing something that we

had indicated would be useful. For us, it was more about people giving us some of their time.


One relative stepped in and gave us an enormous amount of himself, negotiating on behalf of my father retirement village accommodation with long-term frail care for mum. And he did it all with a minimum of fuss.

Some people are very good at giving, while others suck at asking for help. A work colleague who was also diagnosed with cancer around the same time (no, I am not making this all up!) has tended to keep up 'a brave face'

throughout her hospital visits and radiation treatment. She admits that she's always had a problem putting herself first; sick as she is, she still finds it difficult now to have people taking care of her.

If I've learned anything from all of this pain and suffering, it is this: that everyone does it differently and you cannot - not even for a second - imagine what it would be like if you were in that person's shoes.

Buddhist monks suggest however that for friends looking in, there is no greater mistake than to do nothing - simply because one feels one can only do a little. Those who open their hearts and help to alleviate the suffering of others... these are the earthly angels that make the world a more bearable place.

Since writing this article, my friend Sharon died on 23 July. RIP, Sharon. 

1 Give of your time. Just being present as a sounding board for friends in crisis can be a godsend ... provided you've called first to ensure it's a good time to be popping in.

2 Get practical. If you're a whiz in the kitchen, drop by with some soups, stews or home-cooked meals; if not, join the hospital ferrying roster list, or offer to baby-sit the children - just do something useful that comes naturally to you.

3 Take care of the carer. One of my friends is a masseur who offered weekly massages to a sick friend's mother to keep her from falling ill herself. Remember that people tend to overlook the stresses and anxieties that also befall those who look after loved ones.

4 Co-ordinate a group effort. If you talk to other friends and family members about what they're doing, you can avoid duplication and co-ordinate your approach. That way, 12 people don't ring on a daily or weekly basis; instead, a smaller team disseminates the necessary information! One person can take charge of producing and distributing a weekly electronic newsletter... if that appeals to the person in crisis.

5 And when in doubt ... say it with flowers. No bad ever came from too many kind thoughts or thoughtful deeds. So if you're feeling helpless, write a little note, sprinkle some potpourri in the envelope and deliver your missive post-haste. Throw in a nosegay of bedside violets ... and cheer up what could be another difficult day for your family member or friend.