When **ROBIN ROBERTS** faced a serious health scare—for a second time—the prognosis was difficult. Leaning on family and friends for strength, support and a lifesaving procedure, she vowed to beat it.

And she has. BY LESLIE PEPPER

n anniversary is special. But when Robin Roberts blew out the single candle on a red velvet cake in late summer 2013, the celebration was particularly joyful.

The year before, the *Good Morning America* anchor had been diagnosed with myelodysplastic syndrome (MDS), a rare blood disease she developed as a result of chemotherapy treatments for breast cancer in 2008. MDS is a condition in which bone marrow is not populated with sufficient healthy blood cells. Shortly after her diagnosis, Roberts left her anchor chair to begin treatment, which included a bone marrow transplant.

The cake marked the one-year anniversary of that lifesaving procedure.

## It Takes a Family

As she wrote in her *GMA* blog: "Unlike my first

birthday—which of course
I don't remember—this
time around I know I will
never forget all the people
who have reached out to me
over the past year. Your words
of encouragement, smiling faces, and
prayers have carried me through the
toughest times. I know that I would
not have made it to this milestone
without you."

Roberts, now 53, got more than just smiles from those around her. It was her older sister, Sally-Ann, who donated bone marrow for the transplant. Roberts was extremely lucky. Bone marrow donors are scarce, particularly for African-American women.

Nowadays, Sally-Ann and Robin share more than a great smile.





### **BONE MARROW DONATION**

Each year nearly 20,000 people could benefit from a potentially lifesaving bone marrow transplant. If you're thinking about donating, here's what to expect.

- During the procedure, called bone marrow harvest, doctors use a special needle to withdraw the liquid marrow from both sides of the back of the pelvic bone.
- You'll be under anesthesia and won't be aware of the procedure, which usually takes an hour or two.
- ▶ The incisions are so small, you won't need stitches.
- ▶ Afterward, you'll go to the recovery room to be monitored. Most donors go home the same day or the next morning.
- ► Although you may have soreness or bruising in the hip and lower back, most donors return to their regular schedule within a few days.

Roberts also received plenty of support from her Good Morning America family. She announced her illness onair, colleagues by her side and a box of Kleenex Velcroed to the couch. Her fellow anchors not only rallied around her when she revealed her diagnosis but also supported her when she was off the air. When Roberts took a leave of absence, ABC News said there would be no ongoing replacement. Instead, Barbara Walters, Diane Sawyer, Katie Couric and Kelly Ripa offered to tag-team.

"We have so many people who love Robin so much that everyone is willing to come and join us for a bit," said Good Morning America executive producer Tom Cibrowski.

#### **Build Your Team**

When you've been given a life-threatening diagnosis, support from friends and family is important. "People dealing with serious illnesses are better able to manage the emotional impact when receiving little kindnesses from family and friends, and peers who have dealt with similar issues," says William Penzer, PhD, author of How to Cope Better When Someone You Love Has Cancer.

"There is pretty solid evidence that companionship ... improve[s] survival rates for patients with many types

of illness," adds Elizabeth Chabner Thompson, MD, founder of BFFL Co. ("Best Friends for Life"), which designs products to help patients recover from breast and prostate cancer surgeries, among other procedures.

But it's not always easy to get the right support. If you're the family caretaker, it is difficult to ask for help or accept the attention being focused on you. A few lessons from Roberts:

When you need it, reach out **for help**—even if it feels awkward. As Sally-Ann Roberts told Parade, "I was really surprised at how difficult it was for her to be the one in need." Robin was used to being the caretaker in her family. "I'm always the mother hen and I always want to take charge," she has said. But the Roberts family relished the opportunity to give something back.

Chabner Thompson recommends asking specifically for things you need. "If you leave it up to [others], you'll have five lasagnas and no milk in the refrigerator."

Spread the wealth. If you feel bad about putting the burden on one person, ask several people to help. One friend can drive you to appointments, another can pick up your medication, a cousin can just sit and watch television with you when you're too tired to do anything else. There's also a role for email friends, whether they're former work colleagues or people you know primarily through Facebook. They may be the perfect ear for times when you need to talk (or type) things through.

**Spread the word.** Anyone diagnosed with a serious illness will do a lot of research on the topic. Don't hesitate to share your findings with your family and friends. They may dig even deeper.

When Roberts told her good friends Sawyer and *GMA* medical correspondent Richard Besser, MD, about her diagnosis, the trio began calling specialists. "We were like a little tiger team, the three of us," Besser told *Parade*. "People wondered, why is Diane in Rich's office with the door closed?" Besser and Roberts interviewed doctors together; he checked out the medical angle while she sought an emotional comfort level.

**Avoid emotional vampires.** Even well-intentioned friends may head down the wrong path while trying to be supportive. It grates when someone compares his or her medical situation to yours. It's up to you to step in and say, "I know diabetes has been difficult for you, but today I'd really appreciate it if we could focus on me." If that's not possible, it's OK to step away.

CALL



# Healing Inside and Out

The Cancer Resource Centre, 926 Ridge Road, Munster, is a support program of the Community Cancer Research Foundation. Call **219-836-3349** for information.

## Surround yourself with people with whom you can be genuine.

When you're unhappy, disappointed, angry or confused about your disease, you should be free to express your feelings. "Don't be afraid to let people know that you're tired or anxious or in pain," Chabner Thompson says. "If you're grumpy, they won't blame you, they'll blame the illness."

For Roberts, making it through her ordeal has left her with nothing but gratitude toward her siblings, her friends, her medical team and her fans.

Last year, a fan tweeted this question to Robin: "What comforted you most?"
Robin tweeted back, "Faith, family and friends." ■

#### A NEARBY ESCAPE

The June Hawk-Franklin **Garden of Meditation and** Healing is part of the therapeutic environment of the **Cancer Resource Centre in** Munster. A tranquil retreat, the outdoor space has been designed to help cancer patients and their loved ones manage stress, relax and regain control of their health and their lives. The meditation and healing garden promotes the healing of mind, body and spirit by offering a contemplation area among shady oaks and graceful birch trees. Dual waterfalls empty into a serene pond. A brick path winds past the white pine, hemlock, willow, fragrant hydrangeas and medicinal plants. Cancer patients can tap into all their senses and experience the healing qualities of nature. Inside the centre you'll find a variety of educational programs, support services and alternative therapies, all offered free of charge to patients with cancer and their loved ones.

### FRIENDS IN NEED

What do you say to a friend who's seriously ill? How can you make a relative's recovery easier? Here are seven tips for bringing comfort—and even joy—to the people you love.

#### ▶ PREP FOR THE WORST

She may look very different, but don't express shock or go on about her appearance. Give her a hug and say, "It's great to see you."

PRUDENT Instead of saying, "You'll be just fine," which

implies you're dismissing your friend's fears, acknowledge the situation. "I know this must be hard for you."

FIAY FLEXIBLE If your friend has to cancel a visit, don't make her feel guilty. Expect the unexpected when a friend is going through treatment.

**BRANCH OUT** Every conversation doesn't have to center on illness. Ask about your friend's golf game or whether she saw the latest episode of *Downton Abbey*. People going through treatment need to take a break from it every once in a while.

SHARE Sure, your mother or step-cousin Lulu may have had cancer. But everyone's experience is different, and even the most well-intentioned anecdotes can make the

► RESIST THE URGE TO

other person question her own choices.

► MAKE AN OFFER SHE

CAN'T REFUSE Instead of asking how you can help, tell her what you'll do. "I'll take Maddy to dance class today" or "I'm dropping off a frozen casserole tonight." Don't give her the opportunity to say no.

► JUST DO IT! Don't let the idea of perfection stop you. Whatever you do—whether emailing a kitten video or making dinner—will be appreciated.