



Parenting Through Illness

Children's Primary Needs

- Children need to know they will be taken care of no matter what
- Children have the right to know what is happening to his/her loved one
- Children need as much normalcy and stability as possible
- Recognize that each child will respond differently to the family crisis

Is it necessary to tell children about the illness and its treatment?

- Yes, children will often imagine the worst
- Children sense when parents are worried or upset
- They may think they have caused the worry
- Tell the child that if things change with your health, you'll let them know

What kind of information do children need about the illness and its treatment?

- What changes will occur to the patient?
- What changes will occur to the child and family routine?
- Age appropriate information about the illness (what it is, where is it in body, describe treatment, what changes to expect)
- Define common words associated with the illness
- Ask the child to tell you what they understand
- Describe hospital stays, length of stay, whether or not the child can visit or call, who will be taking care of them and for how long
- Describe what will stay the same: i.e. family, routine, friends, church, school, etc...
- Describe feelings that might occur: fear, irritability, anxiety, anger
- Address misunderstandings
- Debunk myths about the illness (whether it is contagious, that all people die from it, radiation makes one radioactive, etc.)
- Do not overburden the child with your own emotional or financial worries: talk to your friends and family instead

Stabilize the child's environment

- Basic rules of conduct should continue to apply
- Plan family activities
- Arrange for continued participation in outside activities
- Keep a regular schedule
- Reassure them about the future, make plans for the future
- Remind them of all the people who are in their lives who will take care of them and love them
- Talk about their everyday lives with them; take a break from illness talk

Ways to help your children cope

- Talk about what is happening in the family openly, but not continuously
- Plan family play times when you expect the patient to feel up to it
- Include the child in decisions when appropriate
- Use your support systems for food, childcare, home repair, etc.; friends, family, church, school
- Inform the school about the family situation and changes when they occur (surgeries, out of town treatments, etc)
- Have regular family meetings (status of treatment & health of patient, assignment of chores, plan for a family fun time)
- Make of calendar of events and post it in a prominent place
- Don't have adult discussions about the illness in front of the children
- Prepare your children for intrusive questions that others might ask, i.e., "Is your dad going to die?"
- Try to add humor to the situation when possible (bald jokes for cancer, etc.)

Worries that children often have when a parent/loved one is diagnosed with cancer. (Possible responses)

1. "Are you going to die?"
This is a very serious disease and it is possible that I could die from it but the Doctor's are giving me very good treatment and we have every reason to believe we will get rid of the cancer in me I will be just fine.
2. "Can I catch the cancer from you?"
No, you cannot catch it from me or anyone else, even if you drink or eat after me.
3. "What will happen to me if you die?"
Daddy will take care of all you kids, you will stay in the same house, go to the same school, have the same friends. Aunt __, Uncle ____, and Grandma/Grandpa will be around to help take care of you.
4. "Did I do something that caused your illness?"
No, there is nothing you wished for, prayed about or did that caused my illness.