



Parenting Through A Serious Illness: How to Help Your Kids Cope

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Worries that children often have when a parent/loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness. (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 doctors are giving me very good treatment and we are doing everything we can to help me feel better.)

2. Can I catch this disease 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 you, 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.)

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 child that if things change with your health, you'll let them know

What kind of information do children need about treatment?

What changes will occur to the patient
What changes will occur to the child and family routine
Need age appropriate information (what is the illness, where is it in body, describe treatment, what changes to expect)
Define common words associated with the disease
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
Debunk myths (the illness is contagious)
Do not overburden the child with your own emotional or financial worries.

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 system 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

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