

HOW A CANCER DIAGNOSIS AFFECTS CHILDREN

Children will have a variety of reactions to the news that their mom has cancer. Some children are worriers. Some are very sensitive to your fear and anxiety. Some seem not to notice. But just like their adult counterparts, they want to know what's going on and if they aren't told the truth, they may imagine something even worse.

When families choose to withhold information about a cancer diagnosis, children may pick up on tension and stress. As a result, they may suspect something is being hidden from them. Children of all ages can sense a parent's anxiety and fear so they can then become more afraid and insecure. Presenting "age appropriate" information is the key to successfully working with your children.

WHAT CAN THE CHILDREN DO TO HELP?

Remind the children, regardless of their age, that there are things they can do to help mom in her healing. They can keep their rooms clean, not fight with their brothers and sisters, help with other chores, and maybe even fix dinner and do their own laundry if old enough.

The best things children can do are cuddle and let Mom know they think she is beautiful. Both, Mom and her children, will benefit from this pure act of love.

3 THINGS KIDS WANT TO KNOW

DID I CAUSE THIS?

Children have wonderful imaginations but they can run wild in stressful situations like Mom being diagnosed with cancer. Some children even think they can make their thoughts and wishes come true.

They worry that if they thought or said something mean while angry, they may have caused the illness. This can cause them to feel very guilty and afraid. Even older children or teenagers may think they had something to do with mom getting cancer. Teenagers who sometimes have more conflicted relationships with their mothers before they got sick tend to worry more about having caused or contributed to her illness. Be sure that your children and your teens understand that they had nothing to do with you getting cancer.

WILL MOM BE OKAY?

We should never promise our children that Mom will be okay. Cancer is a very serious illness, and unfortunately, not all survive. The good news is though, that

more women are surviving every day than in the past. Your child needs to hear that Mom is in very good hands and the doctors are doing everything they can to make her well.

Remind your child that while Mom is being treated for cancer, she will be on medicines that will make her very tired and maybe even sick. Explain to them that the medicine that is destroying the cancer also makes her system weak, but only temporarily. Once she is done with the medicine, hopefully, her system will start to rebuild itself and she will regain her strength.

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As a parent, we want to help our kids get through all their difficult situations. When it comes to talking to them about cancer, it is hard to know how much to tell them, when to tell them, and how to guide them. A serious illness, like cancer, will evoke a lot of emotions and the last thing we want to do is make it worse for your child.

This brochure is intended to share ideas, and suggest possibilities for effective interaction with your children. These guidelines can be reviewed so the entire family can better deal with this challenge.

BREAST FRIENDS

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Breast Friends

OUR MISSION: helping women survive the trauma of cancer...one friend at a time.

3 THINGS KIDS WANT TO KNOW

WILL I BE OKAY?

Children thrive on routine. It helps them feel safe. When life becomes unpredictable, they will need help in adjusting to the changes. Discussing changes in routine is helpful so they know what to expect. Answer their questions simply. Don't offer explanations that are more complicated than the questions they ask. Keep it at their level. Be sure they know who will care for them when you are in treatment so they will understand you are always looking out for them even. Most mother-child relationships stay strong or become stronger during this time. Communications with children, young or old is the best way to keep those bonds strong.

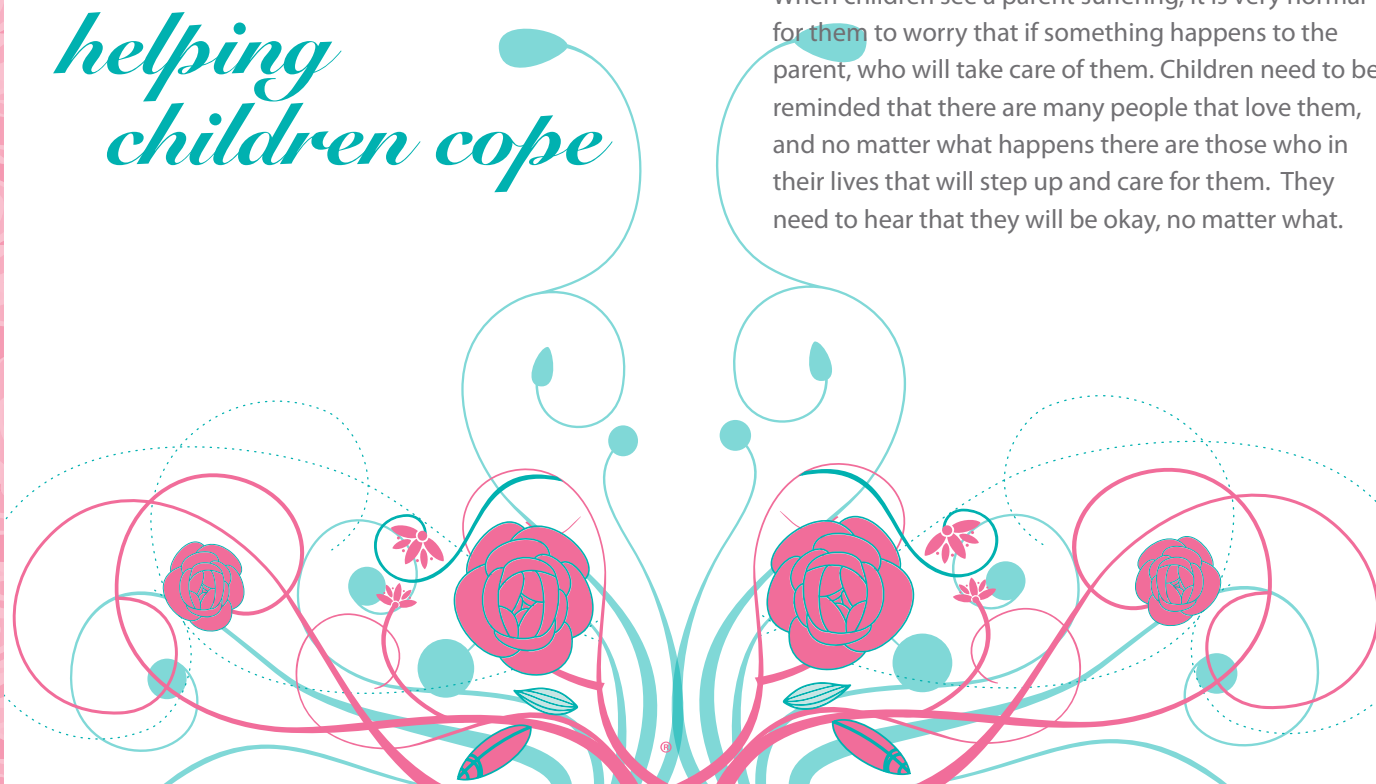
When children see a parent suffering, it is very normal for them to worry that if something happens to the parent, who will take care of them. Children need to be reminded that there are many people that love them, and no matter what happens there are those who in their lives that will step up and care for them. They need to hear that they will be okay, no matter what.

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WHEN MOM HAS CANCER

helping children cope



COMMON REACTIONS

There are some common reactions that most children will have when dealing with their mom's cancer. Here's a breakdown of some of the emotions or fears your children might experience and some suggestions as to how you might address them.

FEAR OF SEPARATION

When small children realize that their mother may be hospitalized or in treatment, they experience a fear of separation. They have little sense of time and they live in the "now." A few days may be interpreted as permanent. If possible have them visit when you are in the hospital. Make their visit as entertaining, positive, and normal as possible. Have them share a craft project with you or tell you what's going on at school. Show them how to adjust the bed by pushing the buttons and make you more comfortable. Be sure that they bring a photo of them and a photo of the whole family for you to have in your room. See if they can think of other things to bring you to make you feel better, like a small bouquet of flowers from your garden or even dandelions from the lawn. These tokens of love will make both of you feel better and important.

FEAR THAT CANCER IS CONTAGIOUS

Many children think cancer is contagious. It is very important to assure children of all ages that it is NOT. Their friends may also think cancer is contagious and may stop playing with your child because of the fear of catching it or spreading it to their mother. It may be appropriate to have a friend or family member call the other parents to explain what is happening so their children know that it's okay to still be friends with your child.

FEAR OF DEATH

This may be the first time that the possibility of death of someone close has ever become a consideration. Often a child's only exposure to cancer was someone who died. Stories of their friend's grandma or aunt may be discussed and the ending may not be so encouraging.

This can be very scary time for all of you. But with the new technology and research advances, even a very serious diagnosis isn't necessarily a death sentence anymore. As you learn more, you will be able to have conversations about the improvements in surgeries and treatment, age appropriate of course, that may soothe some of these fears.

Talking with other women who have gone through breast cancer and are healthy vibrant women will help you, and your family, understand how it can be treated successfully. Hope is imperative and with the help of friends and family, including the kids, spirits can be kept high.

ANGER

If your young child seems angry, anxious or frustrated, encourage him/her to find a way to express their feelings. Have them play with a toy that will allow expression of anger. Encourage them to draw pictures. Ask them to tell you about their pictures. Things that they do or say may give you clues as to how they are feeling. Assure them that it's okay to be sad or mad because sometimes you feel sad or angry too.

For teens being angry, argumentative and distant can be typical behaviors in general, let alone when they have something to be angry about. It is important for the parent to not be punitive, but meet the adolescent's defiance with firmness and understanding. Some teenager may appear not to care. They really do, but are trying to

cope by ignoring the situation. Acknowledge that cancer is difficult to deal with, offer to answer questions, and be supportive. Suggest that they might want to share their feelings with others, such as an adult relative, teacher, coach, or one of their peers.

Encourage your children of all ages to talk about their feelings. Help them express their thoughts and reassure them of your love. One idea is to use activities such as puppets or painting. Older children might prefer writing poetry or drawing.

As difficult as it can be, try very hard not to use your children, no matter how old they are, as your emotional crutch. Find friends or relatives for emotional support or contact an organization like Breast Friends for additional help.



SADNESS AND ISOLATION

Because you may cry often when you are holding your young children, they may think they are causing you to be sad. Acknowledge that you are sad because of your illness and medicines, but be sure they understand that they did not make you sad.

Occasionally older children will share in your sadness or grief and openly cry with you, but often they do not. Some will try to be cheerful when around you, and sometimes will appear as though nothing has changed, but express their sadness/grief when they are alone or with friends. Encourage them to talk with you, or with their school counselors, or other adult they are close to. Keep an eye on your children's school work. Stress makes it difficult to concentrate. If your child's school work is deteriorating, make the teacher aware of the situation at home so that he or she can provide extra help and support for your child.

It is important that you make plans for the future with your family. It's important for you, but it's also important for them to have something to look forward to.

Your children may need extra attention during your treatment. It's ok to allow others in their lives to help you give them that attention. You may want to have their favorite baby-sitter, or grandparent come over for the sole purpose of entertaining your child. If your child has a special friend, try to arrange a play date at their house.

If things get beyond your ability to cope, immediately consult with a professional therapist.

TALKING TO YOUR KIDS

Telling your children can be very difficult so it's essential that you think through what you're going to say. Your words and emotions will have a significant impact on how your child will react. The calmer you are, the less frightened they will be. By talking with your children, rather than withholding the information, they learn that their families are there for support and they can count on you to be honest with them.

HOW MUCH DO I TELL THEM?

Parents often struggle with how much to tell their children. How much your children need to know and can handle will depend on the child's age and level of maturity. Tell them a small amount of information in the beginning in words that are easy for your child to understand. You will know how much more to tell them by the questions they ask. Stop along the way, and ask them if they have heard any words that they don't understand or find scary and be prepared to re-evaluate and discuss further.

If you do not feel comfortable telling your child about your cancer, a close relative or friend may be able to explain things to the child either in your presence or alone. Either way, it is important for the children to have some sense of what is happening. Sometimes, children may receive less attention because of doctor appointments. If they don't understand why this is happening, they might feel as if they are being punished for something.

