

Supporting Children when a Parent has cancer

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How Will I Tell My Children?

- Often a parent's first thought upon hearing a cancer diagnosis.
- Some parents may be tempted to put off a difficult discussion, BUT...
- Children often sense something is wrong.
- Effective communication between parents and children decreases the level of anxiety experienced by children (and parents!)

First Things First

- You must help yourself (in an ongoing way) so that you are able to help your children.
 - Where do you find control?
 - How do you focus on the present?
 - What is “the purpose” of this moment?
 - Where do you feel joy? Gratitude?
 - How do you understand your illness?

Foundation of Communicating with Your Children

- Open, clear and simple communication.
 - Ongoing dialogue vs. one conversation
- It is ok to express your emotions for the purpose of making all feelings permissible (modeling).
- Anchor the conversation back to today.
 - “What Is” vs. “What If”
- Be mindful of **age appropriate** messages and that your children will be getting older over time so your approach will change through the years.

Supporting the Emotions of Your Children

- Allow space for grief along the way:
 - Give permission for sadness and tears .
 - You don't have to fix it... allow those big feelings.
 - Respect denial but be honest about reality.
 - “We do not need to talk today, but we will need to soon.”

Supporting the Emotions of Your Children

- Help children find ways to express anger.
 - Hating the circumstances (understandable!) may be difficult to express to you. Can you facilitate trusted relationships?
- Work hard to find new definitions for “hope” as a family.
 - What is happening now that might actually be good for your children?

Age Matters: Preschoolers

- Preschoolers (5 years and under)
 - Basically ego-centric
 - Who is there for me?
 - Who will comfort me?
 - What if I need....?
 - Will I be ok? **Cancer is not contagious.** They are safe.
 - Magical Thinking. *Internal* questioning, worry, fear and guilt that they have done something to cause diagnosis. **“Nothing you ever did made me get cancer.”**

ROUTINE = SECURITY

Age Matters: School Age

- School age (Kindergarten – 4th/5th grade)
 - “Little Scientists”
 - Fascination with the body and how it works.
 - What is cancer? How does it spread?
 - How does treatment work?
 - Curiosity about medical equipment (the hospital).
 - Ask them if they want to see or go.
 - Enlist the help and support of your medical team.

Age Matters: Middle School/Early Teen

- Middle School and Early Teen Years
 - Peers are becoming more important, yet still very focused on themselves.
 - Might worry about what others are thinking about YOU!
 - If a child fears the loss of peer relationships because they have a parent who is “different,” this may be a struggle.
 - Continue to talk in a straightforward manner, share your feelings (modeling) and reiterate your availability.

Age Matters: Teenagers

- Teenagers
 - Hard to predict.
 - Most sensitive to deception and dishonesty.
 - May want information similar to talking to an adult.
 - Allow for close relationships with other peers.
 - Respect privacy both theirs and your own.
 - Model and openly express thoughts and feelings.
 - Find comfort zones when talking is “ok” or togetherness is permissible. Make it a priority!

Poll Question #1

- Do you feel there is someone you can easily approach with questions about how to support your children through your cancer experience?
 - Yes
 - No

Warning Signs

- Look for patterns (terrible days are absolutely normal to have).
- Any situation that interferes with your child's normal functioning: school performance, eating, sleeping, social interactions.
- Because the parent's condition has become "part of the family" warning signs might be more subtle or gradual.
- You are your child's advocate. You are the expert on your children. When you sense something is different or something is wrong, you are probably right!

Areas of Functioning: Interrupted

- Sleep
- Eating
- Fear
- Developmental Trouble: regression or not meeting milestones
- The Quiet Child

These bullet points are all the ***signs*** of a deeper trouble within your child. Try not to focus on the issue above, rather find ways to explore what is making them feel distressed in general.

Carve Out Time to Play (Connect), Then Tune In!

- Listen closely to the half-murmured conversations children have with stuffed animals or toys.
- Watch for aggressive play or a sudden interest in death and dying.
- Are toys beginning to disappear or “go away” (fear of separation).
- Watch for signs of worry or fear.

Poll Question #2

- Which possible question from your child makes you the most nervous or feel the least prepared to answer (mark all the apply):
 - a) "Will you still be able to play and have fun with me?"
 - b) "What am I supposed to tell my friends at school about you?"
 - c) "Why did you get cancer?"
 - d) "Will you die?"

Finding Time When There is no Time

- Create rituals or routines:
 - 10 minutes before bed
 - Bath time chatter
 - Saturday morning walks
 - Time around the dinner table
- Who is also available to your child?
 - Friends and Family
 - School, Teams, Community
 - Professionals: Social Worker, Hospital Support Staff

How Should I Parent Now?!

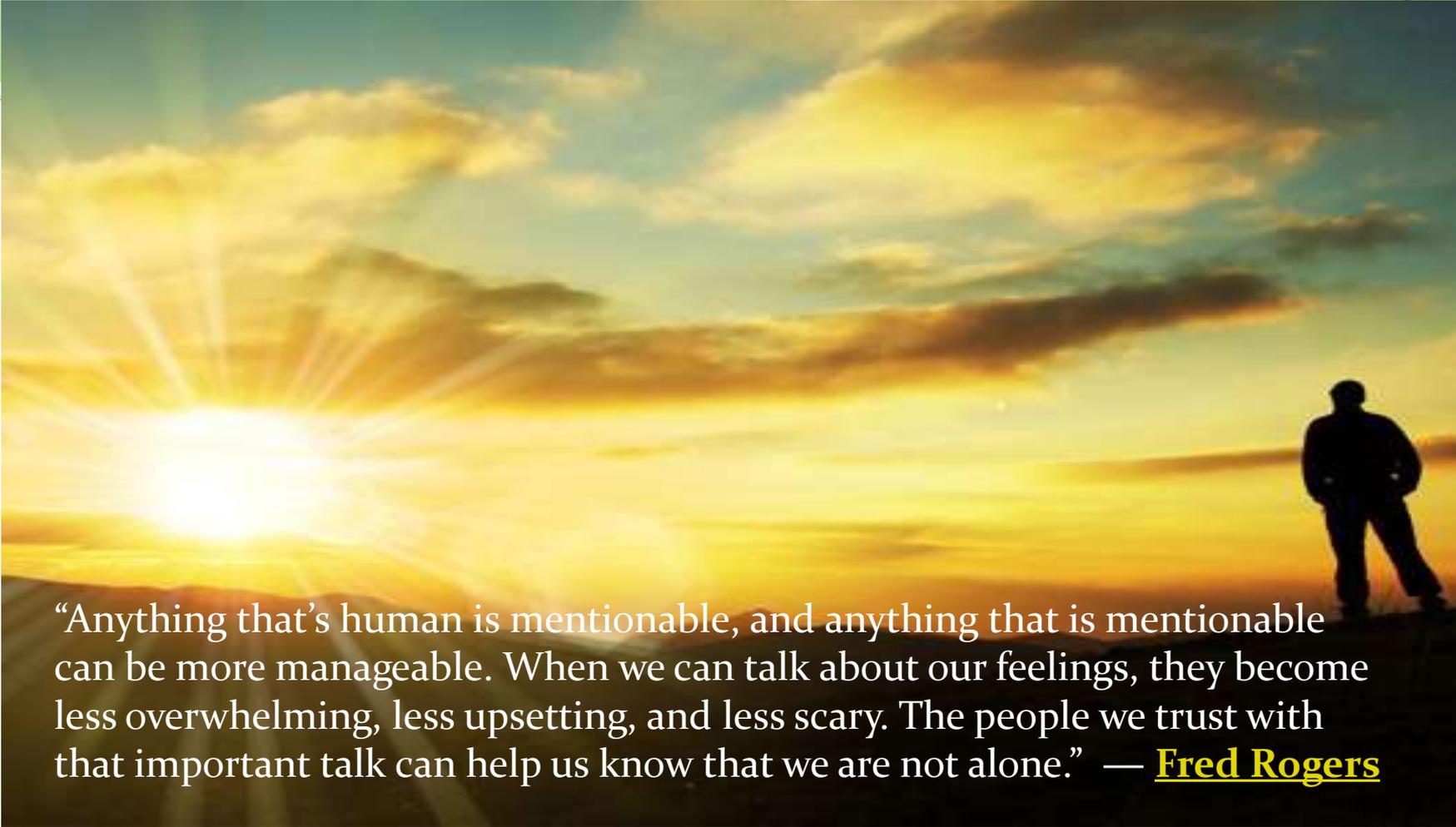
- The same as you always would have!
- Hold onto as much “normalcy” and stability as possible.
 - Maintain the same rules
 - Enforce the same discipline
 - Distribute the same chores
- Consider these boundaries “a hug” that helps children navigate times when many other aspects of their life feel uncertain.

Helping Kids Help Themselves

- Watch for the unique and imaginative ways children find to self soothe, understand the situation, manage their worry and fear and define their sense of reality.
- Encourage these developing strengths.
- You can guide the process and be there for them, but your children now must find the resources within themselves to cope with a parent's chronic illness all through the months and years of growing up.

The Future...

- Children who are prepared and supported can and DO face tragedy and emerge whole, healthy and ready to go on with life.
- When children are not prepared or receive the support they need, they can struggle throughout their lives from a parent's medical crisis.
- Believe in your children.



“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.” — **Fred Rogers**