

For Parents: Coping with Your Child's Cancer Diagnosis



Processing a cancer diagnosis can be an emotional time, perhaps more so if it involves your child. You may not be sure what to do next.

First, remember that you don't have to face this alone. Your friends, family, and your child's care team will be there for you and your child every step of the way. Ask them for help when you need it.

Also remind yourself that coping with your child's diagnosis is complex. There are no right or wrong ways to respond. Shock, denial, fear, anger, and guilt are all understandable feelings.

Be sure to validate these emotions. Give yourself the time, energy, and space to process them. From there, you can do other things to help you cope.

Coping strategies

Cancer treatment can be difficult. It can also take weeks, months, or even years for your child to go through. During this time:

- Rely on the support of your loved ones.
- Make time and space to express any anger or frustration in a healthy way. This could mean finding a safe space to cry, venting to loved ones, or seeing a therapist.
- Reach out to communities of parents who have been through this before. There are support groups in person and online. Check out the [Cancer Survivors Network](#), for example.
- Reinforce any religious or spiritual practices you may have. Talk with your pastor, rabbi, Imam, or any other kind of clergy.
- Set up boundaries for what you and your family want to share. Some families prefer being open with their experiences. Others would rather keep them private.
- Rely on coping strategies you've used in difficult situations in the past.
- Ask a family member or friend to go to appointments with you.
- Find time to connect with your partner and other children.
- Use resources available through your child's treatment center. There may be counselors, social workers, child life specialists, and financial advocates who can help you with coping and practical issues like transportation, lodging, and finances.

What helps you cope may vary depending on what you're feeling. Shortly after the diagnosis, it's common for parents to feel shock and disbelief. During this time, it may help to seek comfort and support from your loved ones. Write down what your child's care team tells you. Prioritize doing things as a family, rather than by yourself.

But you may need to use different approaches for anxiety, anger, and fear. For example, you might want to focus on learning about your child's illness. Use a reliable source or rely on your child's care team for information.

Regardless of what you are feeling, check in with yourself and what you need. Some coping methods might work well for some people and not at all for others.

Managing your child's treatment schedule

After the initial diagnosis, you may need to juggle many things. Between appointments and information about your child's illness, you may feel overwhelmed. Here are a few things you can do to help yourself:

- Use a planner, a notebook, or your phone to keep track of your child's treatments and write down information at appointments. You can also use these tools to record the names of nurses, providers, and other members of your child's care team.
- Ask your child's care team for a schedule of treatments. Knowing how long a treatment takes will help you keep up with other parts of life.
- Keep copies of your child's treatment records. These can include pathology reports, discharge summaries, and chemotherapy doses.
- Create weekly, biweekly, or monthly times in your schedule to learn more about your child's cancer.
- Set reminders on your phone to stay on track with your child's medicines.
- If you choose, share the news of your child's diagnosis with your employer. You may be able to take paid leave or adjust your job responsibilities.

Caring for yourself

Taking care of yourself is not a weak or selfish act. It's vital to your ability to care for your child throughout their treatment. Remember to:

- Ask for help. This can mean getting emotional support from friends, family, or a therapist. It could also mean asking friends and family to help with chores and errands, such as getting the groceries or making dinner.
- Take care of yourself by eating well, getting rest, and taking breaks whenever you can. Let yourself enjoy small pleasures, such as favorite foods and movies.
- Use healthy strategies for reducing anxiety, such as physical activity and meditation.
- Write about your experiences in a notebook or in an app. Keeping a journal is a great way to reflect on your experiences and process them.
- Share your fear and anxieties with someone you trust, such as a friend, family member, or therapist.

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