

Some coping ideas for parents

Here are suggestions for managing some of the feelings, emotions and reactions that parents may experience.

• **Shock and confusion** The information you are given about your child's illness is often very complicated. When a parent hears the word "leukemia" or "lymphoma" and learns that his or her child has cancer, it often causes the parent to initially block out other information about the child's illness. Healthcare professionals understand this. Ask them to repeat information, whenever necessary, as your questions arise. Some parents take notes or tape-record their meetings with their child's treatment team so that they can review what they have been told and share it with other family members.

Many families find it helpful to keep a notebook with all of this important information and to include the business cards of medical and other professionals. This allows you to keep track of everything so that you can go back and review information as many times as needed.

• **Denial** Most parents would like to believe that their child's diagnosis of cancer was a mistake. For a short period of time, denial about the accuracy of the diagnosis may help parents to adjust and shift gears. However, staying in denial for too long may delay the timely beginning of treatment and isolate your child and other family members at a point when communication is very important.

Before beginning treatment, some parents seek a second opinion or request additional information about the credentials of treating physicians or the medical center. In many cases, this may be helpful; however, it is important to schedule consultations or obtain additional information in a timely manner. Healthcare professionals are generally willing to help arrange this.



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● **Hope** Hope plays an important role in the ability to cope, particularly in trying times. A physician wrote, "Hope of improvement is the motivation behind accepting every dose of medication prescribed." Hope provides strength and helps us to maintain the will to live.

Talking with other parents whose children have had a similar diagnosis or gone through similar treatment and have now recovered can sometimes be helpful. The knowledge that other children with similar illnesses have recovered, and that your child also has a good chance for recovery, can inspire hope.

● **Fear and anxiety** You may experience many fears and worries, including concerns about your child's treatment outcome, the health of your other children, finances, major changes in daily responsibilities or employment, how relatives and friends will react, how your child will cope with treatment, and your ability to handle the situation. If you have been referred to a large medical institution for complete diagnosis and treatment, you may have to cope with a new hospital and medical team, perhaps in an unfamiliar city or town.

Some people find it helpful to talk about their fears and anxieties. Others prefer reading books or other information about the disease and treatment. Your child's treatment team includes professionals trained to help you talk, or gather information, about all aspects of your child's illness: physical, emotional and financial. Enlist their support – they want to help you.

Relatives and friends can often be a source of strength and understanding. However, some mean well but are not very helpful. They may deny the illness, offer homemade remedies or disapprove of your choices. Enlist the assistance of professionals to deal with friends or relatives who are not supportive.



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● **Anger** Don't be surprised if you feel angry at times. Parents of children who are seriously ill say they have experienced anger about why this happened to them, anger at their child's physician or the entire medical profession for the difficult treatments, frustration with their health insurance company or with the healthcare system, anger that their innocent child has to suffer, or even anger at their child for becoming ill or at God for not protecting their child from the illness.

Often there is no direct outlet for these angry feelings. As a result, emotions may be misdirected toward family members, co-workers or even complete strangers. Talking about angry feelings with trusted friends, relatives and professionals is one way you can learn to accept these feelings. This will help you to take constructive action when possible. Seek support from other parents in similar situations. When there are issues that spark your anger, try to work with your child's treatment team to change situations or resolve problems. Physical activity or exercise, journal writing and finding private space to vent feelings are all good ways to cope and manage the stress you are experiencing.

● **Guilt and blame** Some parents may react to the stress of the cancer diagnosis by looking for a cause or for someone or something to blame for the cancer. Almost all parents experience guilt – although perhaps for different reasons. You may think you might have passed on bad genes or done something wrong that caused the cancer to occur. You may dwell on past regrets. You may blame yourself for not paying more attention to your child's symptoms and seeking a medical evaluation sooner. However unbelievable, some family members and friends may even tell you that something you or your spouse did caused your child's cancer.

Acknowledge any feelings of guilt you may have so that you can get the information, comfort and support you need. As hard as it is to accept, you may never know what caused your child to get cancer. Remind yourself and your family that no one is to blame.



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If you or a family member is experiencing these feelings, it is important to get support from healthcare professionals in order to gain a better understanding of your child's illness. Psychologists, social workers and spiritual advisors may also be able to help you come to terms with your child's diagnosis. If friends or family members blame a family member for the cancer diagnosis, it is important to remember that they are not correct and that they are trying to make some sense out of the situation, however wrong or inappropriate their reasoning.

● **Sadness and loss** From the moment the diagnosis is made, you may feel a sense of loss. You may come to a realization that life for your child and family will never be quite the same. It is normal to have these feelings. Over time, you will find ways to adapt and gradually develop a new sense of normalcy for you and your family.

Allow yourself to feel sad when a sense of loss overwhelms you. However, if you feel consumed by this emotion or are unable to function well, seek professional help. It is important to work through your feelings so that you can help your child cope and so that you can manage other aspects of family life and work.

● **Doubts about religious and spiritual beliefs** Your child's illness may seem unfair. The seeming injustice can lead you to question your views on the meaning, purpose and value of life, or your spiritual beliefs and relationship with God. You may feel empty, cynical or discouraged.

Exploring these feelings with the aid of a counselor or spiritual advisor is helpful for many parents.

