Helping Children Manage Uncertainty, Loss, and Grief

When someone they know has cancer, children might go through periods of uncertainty. When they lose a loved one to cancer, children of all ages go through grief, sadness, and despair, even though the process might look different from that in adults. Learn how to help children cope with changes in their lives and how to cope with the death of a loved one.

- Explaining Cancer Recurrence to a Child and Helping Them Cope
- Preparing a Child for the Death of a Parent or Loved One
- How Children Understand Illness and Death
- Helping a Child Cope with the Loss of a Loved One

Explaining Cancer Recurrence to a Child and Helping Them Cope

When cancer comes back after treatment and after a period when the cancer couldn’t be detected or found, it is called recurrence. Learning that the cancer is back can be overwhelming. It can make a person feel sadness, grief, upset, or that their future is uncertain.

Explaining cancer recurrence to children can be overwhelming, especially when you are their parent and you have cancer, it might help to process your feelings first and talk to your cancer care team as you think about letting the children know about the
recurrence. You could also reach out to your support system to help you talk to your children.

Some people might not want to tell their children that the cancer is back out of fear that this will upset the child or cause them to worry more. Even though it is true that children are likely to be upset when they learn the cancer has come back, keeping them informed of what is going on might help them worry less and build trust.

Here are some things to consider before or when telling children that a loved one’s cancer is back:

- **Reassure children that it is OK to feel angry, scared, or anxious.** Encourage the children to talk about their feelings with a trusted adult. Help them think of ways to cope with these feelings such as drawing, keeping a journal, praying, or talking to a friend. It is also important to give them space and time to ask questions and express their feelings.
- **Try to find out what they remember from the last time this person had cancer.** You may be surprised by some of their memories or things they misunderstood. Correct any wrong information and add to what they were told in the past. Explain that the cancer has now come back and will need to be treated again.
- **Make sure that children understand basic cancer terms.** Even though they might be older than when the cancer was first diagnosed, don’t assume they understand cancer language.
- **Children need to be prepared so they’ll know exactly how treatment will affect their lives.** This is especially important if the person with cancer lives in the same household. They need to know what the side effects of treatment could be, what changes in the family routine to expect, and when they might return to a more normal life again.
- **Try to make children part of the problem-solving process about how to manage the changes they’ll go through because of the cancer and treatment.** This will make them feel less helpless, make them feel valued, and help them be part of the solution to any problems that come up.
- **Weekly or frequent family meetings are a good way to manage built-up anxiety, especially when the person with cancer lives in the same household as the children.** Meetings can help everyone feel that their concerns are important, and they give others a chance to address these concerns.
- **If a parent has cancer, there might need to be changes in the way things are done.** The family activity schedule may need to be changed to work around more
intensive treatment. You might need to make other arrangements for the kids so that their routines can continue, with other people filling in, until you are feeling better. Even though you can’t do certain things, you might be able to substitute some activities that won’t take quite as much energy. Arrange times to be together to watch TV, read a book, make up a story, play a board game, or whatever else you can think of to spend time with your children. Kids would rather you be there even if you’re a little tired, than not there at all.

When thinking about helping children cope with this news, remember:

- Children can’t always tell you in words but may show you how they feel. You might notice your child being more dependent, worrying more, or being out of character. They might also express themselves through drawing, coloring, or playing. It is important that the parents or guardians pay close attention to how and what the children are doing.
- Ask the children frequently how they are doing and what can be done to help them feel better.
- Children might regress (act younger) when they are under stress. For example, a child who had just become toilet trained might start having accidents. Other children might begin to have separation anxiety or difficulty paying attention in school.
- Children might worry about their loved one dying. When talking to a child about dying, be honest and let them know that sometimes people do die from cancer and while there is no way to know what’s going to happen, let the child know about the outlook of the person’s cancer in a way that is appropriate for their age, and let them know that if you find out something new or different, you will let them know. This does not mean that parents should tell their kids everything they know as soon as they know it. It means that children should be given truthful information when they need it to cope well from day to day. If the loved one is a parent or guardian, they might need to seek help from a professional to help them process their own feelings and discuss ideas to and tips for talking with their children.
- Children thrive on routine and predictability. If the person whose cancer has come back lives in the same household as the child, try to keep their routine and way of life as close to normal as possible. Communicate with the child any expected changes. This will help increase their sense of security.
- Children should be told that although no one knows for sure why some people get cancer, it’s certain that the child did nothing to cause the loved one’s cancer to come back.
- Tell the children that it is OK for them to refuse to talk about their loved one’s
cancer coming back with others.

- Find out as much information as possible about how the child is doing. This could mean talking to the child’s teacher, guidance counselor, pediatrician, a coach, or a professional counselor. This will help you help the child cope better.
- Consider using a children or teen’s book about cancer to guide discussion. Your local librarian can help you find one.

Some children might have more trouble than others coping with the news that a loved one has cancer. Extra help, most times professional help, might be needed if a child:

- Is unable to handle the feelings of sadness
- Feels sad all the time
- Cannot be comforted
- Admits to thinking of suicide or of hurting themselves
- Feels extra irritable
- Becomes very angry very quickly
- Has declining grades
- Withdraws or isolates themselves
- Acts very differently from usual
- Has appetite changes
- Has low energy
- Shows less interest in activities
- Has trouble concentrating
- Cries more than usual
- Has trouble sleeping

You might find it useful to talk with the child’s health care team, school counselor, a child psychologist or psychiatrist, or social worker or counseling staff at the hospital where the loved one is being treated. Get help immediately if a child admits to thinking of suicide or hurting themselves.

Hyperlinks

References


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Preparing a Child for the Death of a Parent or Loved One

Children can often sense when things are wrong around them. It is important to be as open as possible about what is going on, so that the children may continue to trust those around them. Knowing what is going on can also help them worry less, process their emotions better, and cope better with the changes. While most of the information here focuses on a parent of a child dying, it could also apply to any loved one in the child's life.

Children’s possible reactions to learning a parent is dying

Children of different ages have different understandings of death and what it might mean to them. It is important to keep this in mind as you support children who are facing the death of their loved one.

- Some children refuse to believe that their parent is seriously ill and demonstrate this (act out) in their behavior.
- Some act out their sadness and anger by refusing to go along with the family rules.
- Sometimes children withdraw and isolate themselves from others in the family and/or their friends.
- They may refuse to listen to an explanation of what’s going on or pretend nothing is wrong.
- Children may regress, meaning that they do things the way they did when they were younger.
- They might have trouble leaving the parent to go to school, have temper tantrums, or change toileting habits that had been under control.

Children who have a parent who is dying from cancer also can feel:

- Anxiety or depression
- Fear
- Anger
- Responsibility for the parent’s illness
- Fear about the future, their own health, and the health of other members of their family
- Abandonment, especially if the parent is away a lot more than usual for treatments
and other procedures
  * Increased responsibility around the house

**When should children be told that a parent is dying?**

Children, especially young ones, have trouble understanding that death may happen in the future. But they can understand that the cancer is causing your body to not work well and that one day your body may stop working. Many factors influence when a child needs to be told that a parent probably is going to die.

The first depends on what the child has been told over time about the situation. Hopefully, they've been given truthful information from the start about the cancer and how it affects the family. Children need to be told the truth bit by bit over time, depending on how sick the parent is. This way they have a chance to adjust to what they can understand while still going about their everyday lives.

**Talking to children about death**

You'll want to have some uninterrupted time and a quiet place. Consider having the other parent, or another trusted adult with you. If you don’t have someone to help you, ask your social worker, nurse, or doctor who might help you explain things to your child.

Talking to children and preparing them for the death is important, but it’s even more crucial if the child has only one parent. The child knows that the parent provides all or most of their care and will probably worry who would do it if they weren’t around.

This is a tough talk to have with your child, and you may have to rehearse before you can do it without getting very emotional yourself. When you’re ready, give yourself some uninterrupted quiet time with your child. You can open the subject by saying that you know that children often worry about who would care for them if a parent couldn’t, or if their parent died. This lets the child know that you won’t be shocked or upset with them if they ask questions. You can see how the child responds to this statement before you explain your back-up plans. Again, if you don’t think you can handle this talk on your own, get help. Don’t feel that you must do everything by yourself.

* Be as honest as you can about what’s going on
* Let them know that it is okay to feel angry, confused, sad, or scared.
* Reassure them that their feelings are normal
* Reassure them you have planned so they will still be cared for
• Encourage them to open up about their feelings and ask questions any time
• Be clear in communicating with them and use words that they can understand
• Reassure them that they will always be loved and taken care of even when you are not there anymore
• Give teenagers space and time if they need it, and remind them that it is okay for them to continue with the usual activities they enjoy.

Start by asking how they think things are going

It helps to get an idea of how your kids think things are going. An open-ended question like “How do you think I’m doing now?” is a good way to start. Often children sense that things are becoming more serious just by the way you’re acting, by the way you look, or by how much or little you’re able to take part in normal family activities. This usually is a gradual process. They may notice relatives or friends are helping more, or family life seems to revolve around trips to the hospital and there’s less time for the family to enjoy their usual activities.

Ask your child if they’ve noticed any changes, and what they think these changes mean. Don’t assume that you know what’s going on in your child’s mind. You must ask.

Use the right words

It’s tempting to avoid them, but it’s important to use the words “die” and “death” rather than “pass on,” “go away,” “go home,” “go to sleep,” or other terms that make death sound nicer. Younger children often don’t understand what these nicer-sounding words really mean and may not fully understand what you’re trying so hard to say.

Since a child’s understanding is based on what they can directly experience, death should be explained in terms such as these.

• Death means that we’ll no longer see the person we love except in our hearts and minds.
• Death means the person will no longer be physically there in our lives.
• They’ll no longer be with us as they were before, but we’ll still have memories of them.
• Be sure to explain that when a person dies, they don’t feel anymore; the heart doesn’t beat anymore; the person doesn’t breathe.
• Since young children don’t understand that death is final, be sure to say that death is not like a trip; you don’t come back from being dead. Also, make it clear that
death is not like sleeping.

- Using a simple story book is a good way to help explain this. Talk to your health care team, ask a local librarian, or check the resources section to get recommendations.

Depending on their age and many other factors, some children may not be able to really grasp that a parent is dying, and their first reaction is often one of disbelief. They might also feel angry. Reassure the children that this is normal. Children might also wonder who will take care of them when their parent dies. If you have plans already, be sure to share them with your children so they know what to expect.

Be prepared to repeat this conversation

Young children will probably not understand what death is and what it really means the first time they hear it. You may have to repeat this discussion many times for them to fully understand. If a child doesn’t want to believe what you’ve told them, they may ask the same questions repeatedly, often as if the conversation had never happened. They might do this hoping that the answer will be different the next time, hoping that somehow what they’ve been told isn’t true.

Although this is painful for the adult, it’s a key part of preparing the child. In time, the child will accept the reality. This process is how the child comes to accept that life can and will go on without the parent.

Reassure children they will still be cared for

A lot of parents fail to plan for what will happen to their children if they die. It’s important to make those arrangements and let your children know about them in age-appropriate ways. If a family doesn’t have relatives or friends who are logical choices as caregivers, there are social service agencies that can help find possible caregivers. This is a very painful issue to deal with on top of the cancer, but it’s something that should be done. It’s one way a parent can reassure their children that they will always be cared for – no matter what happens. If the children are older, you might want to get their input on who would become their caregiver.

Parents should share the plan with their children in an open and honest way. If a single-parent household, the children should be told the back-up plan in case the parent dies. If a two-parent household, the children should be told what changes to expect. Planning and talking to them about it lets them know how important they are to you. They should also be assured that they will always be cared for, if a parent dies. They should also be
reassured that it is OK to ask questions and express their feelings.

**Help children open up about their feelings**

Depending on their age and personality, children often try to protect their parents from knowing their true feelings. It is ok to cry in front of your children because it can give them permission to cry. Give a name to it, explain that you are letting your feelings out and that it is healthy to do this. Asking your children if they are angry and reassuring them that feeling this is way is normal could open the door to a helpful and healing discussion. Underneath the anger or emotion being displayed, there’s often a deep sadness which needs to be recognized and shared to move on. While these feelings can be painful to express and to listen to, getting them out into the open can take away some of their power and help people feel closer.

Teenagers might have a harder time expressing their feelings. They also should be encouraged to talk to their parents, guardians, or a trusted adult.

**Keep the child informed as the loved one nears death**

No matter the age of the child, preparing a child for the death of someone they know can be hard, especially when it is a parent. Given the fact that cancer can last many months or years, children will have been around for much of their parent’s experience. Hopefully, the child will have been kept well informed all along and will understand when their parent is nearing death. Still, this is usually a hard time for many families because different people in the family will have different coping styles and emotions.

As a parent becomes sicker, there’s a natural tendency to protect the child from the signs of advanced disease. Parents don’t want their child to see them vomiting, in pain, or not able to eat, for example. They might not want the kids to realize that they are too sick to pay much attention to them. But it’s impossible to protect them from everything, and it is better to keep them as informed as possible. Shielding children from these realities may slow down their adjustment to the situation.

Young children do not need to be there when a parent dies, but it’s important for them to stay in their home where they feel the most secure, if it is possible. It may be tempting to have a child stay with another relative during this time, but that can create other problems for the child. Children who have had this experience often resent it. Some of those children said, after they were older, that it made them feel excluded from their family. They felt that their relationship with their parent was not considered important. Some said that it seemed like the family assumed that they could not cope with such a scary and terrible thing as death, so they were sent away.
If a parent is in the hospital, children should be allowed as much contact with them as possible, if it is safe to do so. The same applies to a parent who is dying at home.

Children should also be encouraged to keep taking part in whatever activities they enjoy normally. As noted before, children and teens cannot and should not be expected to keep a vigil at their parent’s bedside.

If the child is older, adults should follow the child’s cues about how much time they want to spend with a dying parent. If a parent is at home, give them an activity they can take part in regularly with their sick parent, such as playing a favorite game that the parent can easily manage (such as a board game), or helping with homework if possible. Some children enjoy reading to their parent or cuddling and watching TV together. These brief periods of time will be sweet memories for the child in the future. Those feelings of closeness will be important when the parent is no longer physically there to comfort the child.

Teens may want to help with some of the sick parent’s care. Their comfort level in doing so will depend on their relationship with the parent, school demands, and their social needs. Since teens are in a phase of their lives when they are naturally separating from their parents, finding the right balance between time spent with a sick parent and time spent on other aspects of their lives can seem challenging.

Teens can help around the house, and it’s natural to depend on them to pitch in during a crisis. In fact, teenagers get satisfaction from being trusted enough to help when the family is in upheaval. It’s important to ensure the teen is still able to have time with friends, take part in school activities, and have parts of their lives separate from the family. It’s good to check in every now and then to see if the balance between home and the rest of their lives is being maintained.

Older children and teens might want to be there when a parent is dying. If the parent is OK with that, this should be supported. Some conflicting feelings are normal since there’s fear and uncertainty involved. It might be useful to ask someone from the medical team to describe what’s most likely going to happen.

**Spiritual and religious beliefs may help comfort children**

A family’s cultural, spiritual, or religious beliefs are often very important in how they understand death and cope with it. For example, if people believe in life after death, death may be seen as a new beginning. Sharing your beliefs with your children can help them process the news and death better. Your clergy person may be able to help you and your child through these discussions.
Consider involving people at your child’s school

It’s important that parents speak to the child’s teacher and/or school counselor about the illness and death of the parent. The school staff can then watch your child and let you know if they notice any problems. If a child is troubled, it will often show up in the school setting, and a teacher who isn’t aware of what’s going on in the child’s life isn’t prepared to help them to cope with it.

Sometimes older children don’t want anyone outside of the family to know what’s going on. They worry about what their peers will think. In general, children don’t like being different from their friends, and those concerns need to be heard. It’s important for you to try to get the child to talk about what they’re feeling. But try to respect their desire for privacy, too.

References


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How Children Understand Illness and Death

Children of different ages deal with illness and death differently. It’s important to consider the child’s age when deciding how to talk about coping with sickness and death. Here are general guidelines for when the loved one who is dying is a parent but can also be applied for other loved ones. These suggestions can help you and the other adults in their lives decide how to best approach each of your children.

**Infants or very young children**

Infants and children under the age of 3 don’t understand death in the same way adults do. Still, they need to be told that the parent is very sick, but not with something that you get over, like a cold or sore throat. The goal is to take advantage of the time the parent has left with the child. It’s also important to try to keep the child’s routine as normal as possible so that they feel loved, safe, and cared for. It helps children to know that Mom or Dad will be in bed more as death nears and won’t be able to play or even talk much. Remind them that it doesn’t mean that the parent is mad or doesn’t love them. Gentle cuddling, hugging, or holding hands may be possible.

Answer any questions the child asks as honestly as possible; in words they can understand. As the child gets older, they’ll be able to understand in more detail what happened with the parent.

- Have a parent or trusted adult who is a regular part of the child’s life spend time with the baby or child daily.
- Keep the baby or child near the parents or regular adult caregiver if possible.
- Get your relatives, nanny, or day care providers to help keep the baby’s or child’s
routine.

- If a parent must be away for care (in the hospital or inpatient hospice), caregivers can use video, phone, and other means so the child can see and hear them in real time.
- Record lullabies, stories, and messages for after they are gone.
- Cuddle and hug often.
- Talk with the team social worker or nurse about your own emotions in dealing with your child’s distress.

Children ages 3 to 5

Generally, children younger than 5 are not able to understand that death is permanent and that everyone dies. Children at this age may expect someone who has died to come back. It often takes time and growing up for them to realize that the parent they loved will not return.

When death is very close, the child should know that soon the parent will die. Help them understand by using phrases like, “Soon their body won’t work anymore.” “They won’t feel or breathe anymore.” or “Their heart will stop.” If you say things like “Mommy will go to sleep,” the child will realize at some point that Mommy didn’t wake up. Children told these kinds of stories can become afraid to go to bed at night – it’s important to tell the truth and use the right words.

Some ideas for talking with children in this age group:

- Give very simple explanations of what’s happening and repeat them often.
- Check on the child’s understanding of what’s happening. Remember that the child may be able to say back to you what they heard the first time or two, but this doesn’t mean they understand it.
- The child will probably show more fear and anxiety when away from the main caregiver. The child will need a consistent substitute caregiver when the main one can’t be there and will need to be assured that they will always be cared for.
- Get your relatives, nanny, or day care providers to help maintain the child’s routine and provide daily care. Be sure the caregivers know about the family situation.
- Have a parent or trusted adult who is a regular part of the child’s life spend time with the child every day.
- Offer choices when possible.
- Do not tolerate biting, hitting, kicking, or other aggressive behavior. Teach the child
how to express feelings in other ways.

- Teach acceptable expressions of angry feelings such as talking, drawing, or pounding a pillow (things that don’t hurt the child or other people).
- Encourage doll play and other play to rehearse or repeat worrisome or painful experiences or ask the child to draw pictures about mommy or daddy. Use play and artwork to help the child understand what’s happening in the family,
- Create opportunities for physical activity.
- Plan short visits with fun activities that include the parent. Be sure that the child understands which of the usual things they cannot do. Laugh together when possible.
- When the parent must be away for care (in the hospital or inpatient hospice), caregivers can use video, phone, and other means so the child can see and hear their parent in real time. Arrange in-person visits when possible. Explain any differences in how the parent looks or sounds ahead of time
- Give simple explanations for crying and sadness. For example, “I just feel a little sad and a little tired today. It makes me feel better to cry and get it all out of my system. Now I feel better.”

Children ages 6 to 8

Children this age are better able to understand death, including that death is permanent. Some children may see it as a monster, ghost, or some other such creature. Death often takes the form of an outside person who can come to catch them and if they run fast enough, they can escape. Children in this age group worry about monsters under the bed, witches, or devils, and it can be hard to reassure them that such creatures don’t exist. They may also think that the other parent or another loved one could have prevented the illness or death from happening.

Children at this age may come up with their own explanations of things, like why a sick parent won’t play with them (“Mommy doesn’t love me anymore because I told her I hated her.”) It’s important to explain changes right away. (“Mommy can’t play with you because she’s sick. She loves you a lot and still wants you to have fun.”) Once children believe their own interpretation, it can be hard to change their minds, and it requires lots of repetition and reinforcement.

Be patient trying to convince a child that a parent has really died. Don’t be hard on yourself if it seems like you can’t get through a child’s normal defense against such a difficult reality.
Here are some tips that may help:

- Keep the child up to date about the parent’s illness and treatment and be sure to explain what the child sees and hears. You may need to keep repeating this information.
- Prepare the children for bedside visits and explain what they will see. Give more information and offer time for questions after.
- Answer all questions honestly, including, “Will Mom (or Dad) die?” Get help from the social worker and cancer care team if needed.
- Listen for unasked questions and pay attention when the child talks about fears and concerns.
- Encourage and help youngsters to identify and name feelings.
- Encourage expressing and talking about feelings, especially anger, and safe ways to do it.
- Teach the child what anxiety feels like and how to manage it.
- Assure the child that it’s OK to be upset, sad, anxious, or angry and that their parent still loves and cares for them.
- Tell the child when death is getting close and let the child visit and be with the parent. Describe the parent’s condition and make suggestions as to what the child might say or do. Just touching the parent can mean a lot to the child. Tell the child to focus on an area of the body that looks the same (such as hands). Tell the child to talk to the parent and tell the parent about his/her day.
- Find out if the cancer center has special groups for kids with cancer in the family.
- It’s OK for the child to see the parent cry or be angry if the child understands that they’re not to blame for these feelings. Try to help them understand that it’s normal to have strong feelings and it’s good to express them.
- At least one adult should give the child permission to ask them questions and express feelings that the child thinks might upset others.
- If parents have trouble listening to the child’s distress because of their own, get family, friends, social workers, or other professionals to help talk with and listen to the child.
- If a child is having trouble in school, explain that it’s normal for school performance to suffer a bit when a parent is in the hospital, and you are not upset with them.
- Tell the child that it’s hard for everyone in the family, but that you are there for them.
- Assure the children that this is not their fault, they didn’t cause the cancer or the death.
- Tell the child’s teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family’s cancer
situation.
- Arrange for the child to stay in school and keep other activities on schedule as much as possible.
- Set up regular substitute caregiving when the parent is away or unavailable.
- Remind the child that it’s normal for them to need play time and time to be with their friends for games, sports, and other activities that they enjoy. It’s OK to still be a kid!
- Arrange for one family member or trusted friend to take a special interest in the child.

If the child shows severe anxiety, becomes fearful, is afraid to go to school, blames themselves, acts depressed, or shows low self-esteem, consider an evaluation by a mental health professional.

Children in this age range want reassurance that their parent loves them. Some want to hug the parent or hold their hand. Some are comforted by exchanging gifts or cards with the parent. These small gestures can become treasured memories for the child.

**Children ages 9 to 12**

Children this age may have feelings of sadness and loss during terminal illness and after a parent’s death. They may even feel embarrassed about their outbursts of strong emotions. They can understand more about serious illness and the finality of death, if they are given clear information all along. This doesn’t mean that the child won’t fantasize about Mom or Dad coming back from death – this is normal. But if given simple explanations about death, they will, with time, understand that the parent will not come back from death and that death is permanent. They’ll also understand that all living things die.

The child will need concrete, basic information about the parent’s illness and treatment to understand what’s going on. Understanding comes slowly, over time, when the truth has a chance to sink in and the child can more easily tolerate the loss.

- Tell the child as much detail as possible about the cancer and what to expect and what the parent may be feeling (for example, weaker, have trouble eating, or sleep a lot). If possible, use pictures from children’s books about cancer, and for older children, science books about the human body. Explain what the child sees. Answer questions honestly.
- Assure children the illness is not their fault.
Let the child spend as much time with the parent as possible. Suggest topics to talk about. If the parent is in a hospital or inpatient hospice, it’s helpful if children this age meet medical and nursing staff and explore the facility a bit.

- Keep the child up to date on how the parent looks.
- Help the child stay involved in after-school activities, sports, and keep him or her in contact with friends. Remind the child that it’s OK to have fun.
- Tell the child’s teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family situation.
- Let the child help if they are interested in helping with the parent’s care, but keep in mind that the child shouldn’t oversee the parent’s care.
- Assure the child that it’s OK to be upset, sad, anxious, or angry and that their parent still loves and cares for them.
- Encourage expressing and talking about feelings but allow the child to keep their feelings private if that’s what they prefer.
- Encourage the child’s interest in reading or writing about cancer or its treatment and their responses to the parent’s illness (if they want to do this).
- Arrange for one family member or trusted friend to take a special interest in the child.

Teens

Teenagers have an adult understanding of death but might not have adult coping skills. They may have a particularly tough time with the loss of a parent. This is easier to understand if you keep in mind what a teen needs to accomplish in growing up. The major task of the teen years is to achieve a separate identity from their parents and discover themselves as young adults. The struggles that go on between parents and teens are a normal and necessary part of gaining a new identity.

Teenagers often behave in unpredictable ways – one day they feel independent and the next they retreat into the safety of childhood. As every parent of a teenager knows, it can be a delicate balancing act between giving a teenager enough independence to learn and experience the world while trying to protect them from what they’re not yet mature enough to handle. These struggles go on in every household.

Teens are old enough to know that their lives will greatly change due to their parent’s illness and death, and they struggle to deal with this threat. They may cope in ways that are hard for parents to understand, such as refusing to talk about the illness or trying to take control. Others may adapt, try to get closer to parents, and/or try to restore order to the home.
As the parent gets sicker, the teen may want to sit with them for short times each day. Some teens may want to be as far away as possible from their sick family member and thoughts about their death. Most want to spend time with the parent, but still have some time to be a kid. It’s OK for the teen to help, but they should not oversee their parent’s care.

Some tips on helping teens:

- If they are interested, give teens details about the parent’s condition, symptoms, possible side effects of medicines, what they might expect in the next few days or weeks, and other information.
- Keep the teen up to date with what’s happening with the parent’s treatment. Answer all questions honestly, even as death approaches.
- Let the teen spend as much time as they like with the parent, if possible. Suggest topics to talk about.
- Explain that even though the parents have less time and energy for them, they still love and value them.
- Tell the teen’s teachers, coaches, and other school staff about the family situation.
- Discuss any spiritual concerns related to illness, death, and dying.
- Try for as normal a life at home as possible.
- Don’t expect the teen to take on caregiving and other difficult tasks. Talk with the cancer care team about your family situation and see if you can get other help.
- When possible, let the teen have a voice in where to go after school and in whose care they prefer to be when a parent can’t be there.
- Be sure teens know that having fun and spending time with friends are important parts of their lives, and there’s no need to feel guilty about it.
- Encourage teens to keep up their usual involvement in school and other activities.
- Ask a relative or trusted friend to take a special interest in the teen.
- Address feelings of anger and frustration (even if they are unspoken).
- Being willing to tolerate some reluctance to share thoughts and feelings.
- Teens may try to protect parents by trying to hide their sadness, anger, or fears. Check in with teens often and let them know that everyone has feelings that can be confusing and overwhelming. Tell the teen it’s OK to ask you questions and express feelings that they think might upset others.
- Encourage your teen to keep a journal or log.
Grief can look different in a child

Children of all ages go through grief, sadness, and despair after losing someone they love, especially when that person is a parent. Even though the grieving process might look different from that of adults, it is important to be aware of the signs and support the child through it.
When someone a child loves dies, grieving is natural and expected. Grief is a normal response to loss, and the process should be encouraged, not suppressed. A child’s future mental health depends upon them experiencing all aspects of normal grief. While most of the information here focuses on a parent of a child dying, it could also apply to any loved one in the child’s life.

Grieving involves many different emotions over time, all of which help the person come to terms with the loss. Children grieve differently from adults, and each child grieves differently. Each phase of growth and development may bring up new aspects of the loss and the child may grieve over and over. This is true even for children who were infants when the person died.

How a child grieves will be affected by their age, development, their relationship with the person who died, how the child is cared for after their loved one’s death (especially if the person who died is the parent), how the child communicated with the family and how the parent(s) or caregivers communicate with the child and grieve themselves. Other changes, challenges, and losses might also impact how a child will grieve.

Children often will feel sad or show other emotions for a short time, then go back to their usual activities or go play with friends. Adults might mistakenly think that the child has already gotten over it, or that the child doesn’t fully understand the loss. Some children grieve in spurts; moving back and forth between grieving and being interested in everyday things. This can go on for years after the death. Others might have prolonged grief, and some might not even show signs that they are grieving.

If the loved one had a long and difficult battle with cancer, grieving might have started before the actual death. The child might be able to settle into a quieter routine while handling their grief. But caregivers need to keep checking in with the child – listen to concerns and find out if the child has questions. This can be hard at times, because children often respond in ways that may make them seem unconcerned, callous, or indifferent. It helps to remember that children feel the pain of loss, but are not able to express it the same way that adults do. It can take a long time to adapt to losing a parent. Sometimes emotional symptoms can become more severe and interfere with the child’s or the family’s life.

When children lose a loved one, they might not have the necessary coping skills needed to adapt to the loss. A surviving parent or caregiver may be overwhelmed with their own feelings in addition to the grief of their children. But it is important for children to feel adequately supported as they grieve to avoid developing psychological illnesses like anxiety or depression that might last a long time.

When a parent has a terminal illness, they often worry that their death might destroy
their children’s ability to enjoy life. However, children can and do go on to live normal lives after going through a loved one’s death. With help, most children can be happy again and enjoy their lives.

Things that might help a child adjust include:

- Making sure that the child knows that nothing they did caused the death of the loved one.
- Paying more attention to the needs of the child, especially emotional needs. If the loved one who died is a parent, reassuring the children that they will continue to be loved and cared for.
- Keeping an open channel of communication with the child after the death of a loved one. Answer any questions as honestly as possible for their age.
- Telling the child who will help care for them on a day-to-day basis. Also letting them know who will attend special occasions that they celebrated with the parent who died. For example, telling a daughter who will take her to a daddy-daughter dance.
- Reminding children that their feelings are normal and might change from day-to-day, and encouraging the children to talk about their feelings.
- Continuing to talk about and share information about the loved one’s life and death with the child. Asking open-ended questions like “How are you doing since your mom/dad/aunt/sister died?” might invite deeper conversations with the child.
- Offering reassurance and helping them learn ways to cope with their feelings and adjust to living without their loved one.
- As the caregiver, trying to remain emotionally healthy yourself – if you need help, get it.
- Ensuring that the child’s needs are met and they are sticking to their routine as much as possible.
- Finding out about support groups for children in your area. Talking to other children who have gone through the same thing might help them cope better.
- Giving the children the option to attend the memorial service or any traditions if they want to. Explain to the children in an age-appropriate way what to expect from memorial services or traditions and give them the opportunity to ask questions.
- Helping the children identify healthy ways of coping like individual and group therapy, art, music, sports, writing, scrapbooking or memory boxes to collect memories, or picking up a new hobby.
- Understanding that, just like adults, a child will not only grieve the loss of their loved one, but also grieve other losses like less availability for a surviving parent, maybe loss of home/needing to relocate and experience loss of friends and school
supports, changes in routines, etc.

- Helping the children celebrate special days like the loved one’s birthday, Mother’s Day, or Father’s Day in a way that helps them cope with any sad feelings or memories that they might have on that day.

As the child matures, their understanding of what happened to their parent – and to them – may change and deepen. They may have more questions, or ask questions that you’ve answered before. Keep answering the questions honestly, and check to find out how much the child understands. They may need more support from you to correct misperceptions from their younger years, and integrate this extra information at their new level of understanding. This probably will happen a number of times as they get older.

**Grief in younger children**

When a parent dies, younger children are affected differently. A younger child may feel upset that the parent isn’t coming home day after day. They may ask the same questions over and over, like, “Where did he go?” Offer the child things that seem important from the parent who died, such as special belongings or gifts they may have left for the child. Some children find it comforting to have clothing or other items that had belonged to the parent, especially during the first year or so after the death.

Toddlers and preschoolers might think they did something to cause the death of a parent. Their behavior might even regress to things they did before, like being unable to use the toilet, or sleep through the night. Be prepared for trouble sleeping, and younger children may be clingy and not want to sleep alone. This usually gets better over the course of a few months. If available, it may help the child to go to bereavement groups with other children.

Most children like looking at pictures of their parent during happier times, and hearing stories about them. Routines are important, so try and get back to them quickly. Help the child get back to school and their usual activities when all the ceremonies are over.

**Grief in teens**

Teenagers are still learning how to identify and express their feelings and thoughts. They may feel more comfortable spending time with their friends. It’s important to keep the lines of communication open to help support and guide your teenager as they learn to cope with their loss and grief reactions.
After a loved one dies, some teens cry or get very angry, while others want to spend time alone. Some need to be around friends and talk. Some teens might take on more responsibility, especially if someone they lived with died. Teens also find it comforting to have pictures, clothing, and/or other items that had belonged to the loved one.

If the loved one who died was a parent, teens may regret arguments with the parent, disobedience, and other issues. There may be guilt over things the teen said or didn’t say to the parent. Sometimes it helps for the teen to write a letter to the parent saying all the things they didn’t say before, as well as all the things they wish they could say now. Teens could also have trouble talking about the death of a loved one, out of fear of being distanced by their friends. For many teens, it helps to talk to an adult who can listen without judging them. There are also support groups and websites that are just for teens. These can be safe outlets for emotions and good sources of support and encouragement.

**Signs that a child might need extra help after a parent’s death**

Depression and complicated grief in children can look different from an adult’s. Look for a change in behavior, like sudden changes in grades, withdrawal, or losing friends. Some children might seem more angry and irritable than depressed.

Complicated grief is different from the usual grieving process. It’s marked by how long it lasts, how much it interferes with the child’s life, or how severe it is. Sometimes, a child will seem to be stuck in the process of grieving. Grief reactions or mourning processes like this are not only unusual, but are also unhealthy. If it’s severe and lingers, the child might need professional help to get through the grieving process.

These problems can show up months or even years after the parent’s death. If a child seems to be having trouble, it could mean a more serious problem than the usual grief response to losing a parent. Extra help is needed if a child:

- Displays or talks about feeling angry, sad, or upset all the time
- Cannot be comforted
- Has more nightmares than usual
- Admits to thinking of suicide or of hurting himself or herself
- Changes from one mood to another quickly
- Has declining grades
- Withdraws or isolates himself or herself
- Acts very different from usual
- Has appetite changes
- Has low energy
• Shows less interest in activities
• Has trouble concentrating
• Cries a lot
• Has trouble sleeping
• Daydreams or seems distracted a lot of the time

When a child shows any of these symptoms, it may help to offer more support. But if the usual ways of handling these problems aren’t working, or if the problem goes on for more than a couple of weeks, the child may need extra help. (For more serious problems, such as if the child is thinking about hurting himself or herself, help is needed right away.)

It may help to talk to the child’s pediatrician, school counselor, or with the social worker or counseling staff at the hospital where the parent was treated. These experts know how children tend to react to losses like this, and they may be able to offer ways to help with the problem. They can evaluate the child and make sure that any needed help is given. They may also be able to suggest books, videos, and/or children’s support groups that may help. Rarely, a child may need to see a psychiatrist for medicine or counseling

Hyperlinks


References


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